



RNWMP:

# BRIDE FOR PETER

Mail Order Mounties

# Amelia C. Adams

RNWMP: Bride for Peter  
Mail Order Mounties Book Twenty  
by Amelia C. Adams

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## Table of Contents:

Chapter One

Chapter Two

Chapter Three

Chapter Four

Chapter Five

Chapter Six

Chapter Seven

Chapter Eight

Chapter Nine

Chapter Ten

Chapter Eleven

Chapter Twelve

## Chapter One

Callie Brown snuggled into Victor's side as he rounded the last bend in the road that would take them to the Ottawa train station. He looked down at her and smiled.

"You're making it a little hard to drive, sweetheart," he said.

"Oh, I'm sorry." She sat up straighter. "I just can't help it. I'm so excited."

"I am too." He glanced at her again. "No regrets?"

"None at all. You?"

"Not a one."

When Callie had taken the job as assistant cook at the sprawling Vanderbilt estate the previous year, she'd never expected to fall in love with the heir to the Vanderbilt fortune. Now they were on their way to Montreal to get married, slipping out from under his father's thumb. She had no idea what the future would hold for them, but Victor would be there, and that was all that mattered. Besides, nothing could possibly happen that was worse than what she'd already been through—it was time for fate to smile on her kindly.

Victor parked the car, then hefted their bags out of the back. "By tonight, we'll be married," he said, giving her a broad smile. "And you'll have the life you've always dreamed of."

"I've only been dreaming of you since the day we met," she replied.

He bent and gave her a quick kiss. "Let's be off, then."

They moved toward the ticket window, and it was nearly their turn when they were interrupted by a voice rumbling across the platform. "Victor!"

Callie closed her eyes. This couldn't be happening. They'd thought Mr. Vanderbilt was out of town—that's why they'd chosen this particular day to go. But no, he was here, charging toward them like an enraged bull.

"Get out of line and let these nice people behind you buy their tickets," Mr. Vanderbilt said when he reached them, giving a nod to

the other passengers. He took Victor's elbow and pulled him around the corner of the ticket booth, all but pushing his back up against the small building when he let go. "What's going on here?"

"Callie and I are getting married, Father," Victor said. Callie winced when she saw the look that crossed Mr. Vanderbilt's face. "We're on our way to Montreal."

"Like thunder you are!" Mr. Vanderbilt threw Callie a look of pure disgust. "Listen, boy. I've never minded your little dalliances with our other maids—and neither did they, apparently. But marrying one of them? Have you lost your mind?"

"Dalliances?" Callie stared at Victor. "What is he talking about?"

"Never mind, girl," Mr. Vanderbilt snapped. "This is between me and my son."

"No, sir, I think it's very much between me and my fiancé." Callie took a deep breath. "Explain yourself, Victor."

"It's true that I've had small moments of indiscretion with members of the house staff, but that was before you came into my life," Victor said, turning to her with pleading eyes. "None of that had anything to do with you."

"And it will continue to have nothing to do with her because you're not going to Montreal." Mr. Vanderbilt crossed his arms. "You're returning to the house with me, and you, Calliope Brown, will go wherever it is your type goes."

"We're getting married, Father, and that's all there is to it," Victor insisted.

"Oh? So you're ready to give up your entire inheritance for this kitchen maid?"

The stubborn expression on Victor's face wavered. "What do you mean? My holdings are all written up in my name."

"In your name, after a manner of speaking, but I'm the trustee, and I can do whatever I like with those funds. You have a choice to make, and you'd better do it fast. What's it going to be? Your entire future as a Vanderbilt, or a life of poverty with this . . ." Mr. Vanderbilt flicked a finger in Callie's direction.

Her heart was pounding so fast, she was nearly lightheaded. "I

don't care about the money, Victor," she said. "I never have. We'll be happy together no matter where we are—I don't need that house you promised me. We'll be fine."

Victor swallowed. "I'm sorry, Callie," he said after a long moment. "But this is goodbye."

"What?" She took a step backward, disoriented. "I don't understand."

"My father holds the purse strings, and that means he holds the power."

"But . . ." She blinked, trying to stay calm. "There's so much more to life than money and power. What about love?"

Mr. Vanderbilt snorted. "You naïve girl. Victor doesn't love you—he's never loved anyone but himself. Didn't you see how quickly his mind was made up just now? It didn't even take him five minutes." He reached into his pocket, pulled out a wallet, and removed a couple of bills. He thrust them into Callie's shaking hands. "Buy yourself a ticket somewhere—I don't care where. Just don't come back to Ottawa." He grabbed Victor's bag from the ground and marched away, calling over his shoulder, "Get a move on, son."

Callie reached out and caught Victor's sleeve. "Are you really leaving with him? I thought . . ."

He nodded without looking at her. "I'm sorry, Callie, but this is how it has to be." Then he pulled away from her grasp and walked in the direction his father had gone, leaving her there in the shadow of the ticket office, bewildered.

She reached out and touched the wall of the small building, trying to stay on her feet. She had to think. She needed a plan. The money Mr. Vanderbilt had given her would buy her a train ticket and a meal or two, but not much beyond that. She had a few savings in her bag, but that was it. All she had in the entire world. No family, and she couldn't return to Ottawa and seek out her friends. The Vanderbilts had powerful connections, and if they warned her to stay away, well . . . she'd just as soon not find out how they planned to follow through on that threat.

She picked up her bag, walked over to a bench, and sat down. She

was utterly and completely exhausted. She'd just gone from experiencing the happiest moment of her life to the most miserable within seconds, and she felt as though every bit of energy had been yanked from her by a giant, unseen hand. The weariness was just too much, and she began to cry. She wasn't by nature a crier, but she couldn't hold back the tears any longer. She had never been so alone in her life.

Suddenly, she wasn't alone. An older woman in a blue velvet traveling dress sat down beside her and patted her hand. "There, there," the woman said. "I'm sure it can't be as bad as all that."

"I'm afraid it is," Callie replied. "This was supposed to be my wedding day, and he just left me here at the train station."

"Why, the nerve of him!" The woman looked around. "Which one is he? I'll go give him a punch in the nose!"

Callie smiled through her tears. "He's gone already. Otherwise, I'd be more than happy to see you punch him."

"And I'd be more than delighted to do it. I get so few opportunities to punch people anymore." The woman smiled at her. "My name is Hazel Hughes. Who are you, my dear?"

"Calliope Brown. Callie, actually. I rather hate my given name."

"Please don't think I'm being rude, but it's not my first choice of names either." The woman tilted her head and looked at her curiously. "What are you going to do now? Do you have a home, a family to go back to?"

"I don't have anyone," Callie replied. "I was orphaned when I was twelve, and I've worked ever since. Last year, I thought all my troubles were over when I came to the Vanderbilts', but I was certainly wrong."

"The Vanderbilts?"

Callie gasped when she realized what she'd said. "Oh, please, Mrs. Hughes, forget I said anything. I didn't mean to let their name slip."

"It's quite all right. I do enjoy a good gossip just like anyone else, but I know when to be discreet. And you may call me Miss Hazel." She patted Callie's hand again. "I wonder if I might make a suggestion. I know it's a little unexpected, but you see, I'm a matchmaker, and I'm

taking those three young ladies to the town of White Fox in Manitoba to marry some of our boys in red serge. I was supposed to have four brides, but Barbara . . . well, I always did wonder if she was cut out to be a Mountie's wife. She insisted that she was, but at the last minute, she ran off. Would you be willing to take her place?"

Callie felt her mouth drop open. "I'm sorry—I must have misunderstood. Did you just ask me if I'd go to Manitoba and marry a Mountie?"

"Quite a lot of M words in a row there, but yes, that's what I said."

"But . . . how can I marry someone I've never even met?"

"The other three girls are doing exactly the same thing. They've decided to take a chance on fate and see where the wind blows them. The one there on the end is Madelyn. She's going to marry Gilbert, who just lost his wife—she's going to help him raise twin daughters."

Callie looked over curiously. Madelyn was a beautiful young woman with dark hair and a trim figure. "Why would she do that? Surely she could find a husband here without having to travel all that way."

"I'll let her share her story when she's ready. Next is Ida, and her daughter, Lily. Lily's recovering from surgery to correct a cleft palate, and a sweeter little girl you'll never meet. They've stayed with me for the last little while, and I honestly don't know what I'll do without them." Miss Hazel dashed away some sudden tears. "But I know they'll be happy in White Fox, and that's why I'm sending them."

"But how do you know they'll be happy? Have you met these men? Have you seen where they live?" Callie couldn't wrap her head around the idea of tying her life to that of someone else's when that someone else was a stranger in every way.

"It's a simple little thing called faith, my dear. I don't know everything, but I do know that when I put my faith in what's right and good, things tend to work out for the best."

Callie nodded. "And the last girl?"

"That's Colleen. Isn't she lovely, with all that red hair? I matched her sister Molly not long ago. Can you believe, Colleen's mother wants



her to become a nun? Now, I have the greatest respect for nuns—don't misunderstand. But I also know that it takes a certain kind of girl to make a good nun, and Colleen's a little too full of zest. An adventure like this is just what she needs." Miss Hazel turned back to Callie. "What about you, my dear? What do you need?"

"I . . . need a place to be. I need to feel like I belong." An aching feeling welled up in Callie's chest. "I need a family."

"If you come with us, I can promise you, these girls will be like sisters to you," Miss Hazel said. "And your groom? I've known his family for several months now. I first matched his sister, Evelyn, and since then, I've worked my way through the family. After this, there's just one Mountie brother left to go."

"Are all the brothers Mounties?" Callie asked.

"Yes, they are. Every one of them. And they're good, strong people—I've been very impressed by them. I can't promise that you'll fall in love with Peter, or him with you, but I do know that he'll take wonderful care of you and treat you well." Miss Hazel searched Callie's eyes. "I just need you to decide quickly. Our train leaves soon."

Callie pressed her lips together. This was happening so fast—how could she possibly make a decision of such magnitude without time to think it over? But the truth was, she had no alternatives here in Ottawa, and if she were to buy a ticket somewhere, she wouldn't know where that somewhere should be. At least this way, she was assured of a warm home and someone who cared about her. And love? She nearly snorted. She was done with love. Victor had ruined that for her forever.

Almost before she finished the thought, she nodded. "All right. I'll come with you."

Miss Hazel beamed. "That's just wonderful! You see, having a little faith makes everything work out in the end. You needed a place to be, I needed a fourth bride, and we were brought together here on this train platform so we could help each other out."

Callie shook her head. "You don't think this was just a coincidence?"

“Oh, my dear, so few things really are coincidence.” She stood up.  
“Let’s get your ticket and be on our way.”

“All right.” Callie paused. “Is it an expensive ticket? I don’t have much . . .”

Miss Hazel looped her arm through Callie’s. “You’re not buying your ticket, dear girl. Your groom already took care of it.”

“But he’s expecting . . . what did you say her name was? Barbara?”

Miss Hazel laughed. “He’ll be much happier to get you instead. I can already tell, you’re the one I was meant to bring all along.”

Callie didn’t know how Miss Hazel could be so sure. Hopefully, she was making the right choice, and things would work out for the best in the end.

## Chapter Two

Peter Murray rubbed his eyes and tried to stifle a yawn. Ever since Bert's wife died, leaving him with two little girls to raise on his own, Peter and the other Mounties had taken over the night shifts so Bert wouldn't have to leave his children at bedtime. It really wasn't a huge hardship, but Peter did enjoy his sleep, and when his routine was disrupted, it was hard for him to function.

That's why he'd encouraged Bert to consider remarrying. Bert hadn't felt ready, but those girls needed a full-time caretaker and not just a daily tender. Peter's sister, Evelyn, had gotten married several months before, the whole thing arranged by a little old woman they called Miss Hazel. Then Peter's brother Jonathan decided to give it a go, and then his brother Samuel. They all seemed perfectly happy, and so, after talking it over with the three men in his command, Peter asked Evelyn for Miss Hazel's contact information.

Now four young women were on their way to White Fox. Peter looked at the clock—their train would be arriving in about an hour. Bert had stated that he wasn't going to fall in love with his bride, and Peter didn't see anything wrong with that—the young woman had been told as much, so her expectations would be where they should be. Husbands and wives could be friends and companions without being in love, and Bert needed someone to help shoulder his burdens.

As far as Peter went, he was ready to fall head over heels. He'd always wanted a wife and family, but being a Mountie didn't leave a man a lot of time for courting—especially when he had leadership in his sights and had reached the goal of commanding his own post before he was twenty-eight. Now that he was assigned out here in the small town of White Fox, it seemed that his chances were even worse, as there were so few single ladies in this area. Writing to Miss Hazel would be just as good for him as it would be for Bert, and hopefully, for Andrew and Marshall as well.

Andrew entered the Mountie station and put his hat on a nail by the door before taking a seat. "Another train robbery, this one about

sixty miles from here,” he said, sliding a telegram across the desk. Peter picked it up and looked at it, giving a nod. “They’re getting closer, sir,” Andrew added unnecessarily.

Peter rubbed his face. “Let’s not tell the others until after we’ve met the young women, all right? I think that after traveling this distance and sacrificing the way they have, the girls deserve to have a calm, quiet welcome. There will be time enough for all this tomorrow.”

“Agreed.” Andrew gave a nod. “So, we have an hour.”

“That we do.” Peter noticed that Andrew’s knee was bobbing up and down. “Are you nervous?”

“Me? No. Yes.” He gave a chuckle. “I’m not only getting married, but I’m gaining a daughter. I like children, but I’m not sure I know how to be a father. I bought a little bear at the general store—do you think she’ll like it?”

“Of course she will.” Peter was secretly amused to see Andrew rattled. “I imagine that Bert’s bride feels much the same way you do right now—she’ll be gaining two daughters, not just one.”

“So many little girls!” Andrew chuckled. “I hope Mr. Gellar keeps his shelves stocked with hair ribbons. I have a feeling we’re going to go through a bunch of them.”

“And you’ll be happy to do it, I’m sure.” Peter shoved a stack of papers across the desk. “Help me organize these, would you? I’d like to get them all wrapped up before we meet the train—one less thing eating at the back of my mind.”

Andrew helped sort through the papers and file them away. Peter hated the paperwork aspect of law enforcement—he would so much rather focus on tracking down suspects and breaking up fights, but paperwork was a necessary evil, as his father reminded him whenever he complained, and as the man in charge of this post, it fell on Peter to see that it got done. He liked having the ability to make decisions for their unit, but there were certainly downsides to being the boss.

At last it was time to head over to the train station. Peter laughed and joked with the other men as they walked the short distance. Bert seemed apprehensive, and Peter could well understand why. Andrew

was nervous, but excited. Marshall seemed as though he couldn't care less.

The Mounties were accosted by Mrs. Obregon as they tried to reach the platform. She was one of White Fox's more interesting characters. After Marshall reassured her that they'd do what they could to solve the alleged murder of one of her hens, hopefully tiding her over for another day or two, they turned their attention to the train.

As the women disembarked and the older woman of the group began their introductions, Peter's eyes kept straying to the cautious-looking blonde who hung back from the others. She kept her hands clasped tightly in front of her, the strings of her reticule tangled up in her fingers, and she kept moistening her lips as though she was thirsty. He was curious about her—why was she more nervous than the others? And why had such a pretty girl needed to travel such a long way to find a husband? Surely she'd had offers galore back home, wherever home was.

Of course, he chided himself, not every mail-order bride chose that life because they were out of options. He was doing her a disservice by assuming this was her last hope for marriage.

"And you must be Peter," the older woman said at last. "I'm Miss Hazel. You look just like the others in your family—I'd recognize you on any train platform anywhere."

He tipped his hat. "It's a pleasure," he said. "I've heard a lot about you. Welcome to White Fox."

"It looks like a charming community, and I'm sure our girls will settle in quickly." She turned and motioned for the blonde to come to her side. "This is Callie. I know you were expecting a Barbara, but she decided at the last moment not to join us after all."

"I hope she's all right," Peter replied.

"Oh, she'll be fine. She just needs to make up her mind once and for all what she wants out of life, and maybe to be willing to work for it." Miss Hazel brightened. "But that's neither here nor there. Callie was delivered almost to my doorstep, as it were, and I believe the two of you will suit very well."

Peter pulled his hat all the way from his head. "Miss Callie . . . er . . ."

"Brown, but Callie's fine," she replied. Her voice was soft and sweet, and he almost had to strain to hear her.

"Miss Brown, I'm pleased to meet you." Peter didn't know why, but he felt more comfortable being formal with her. He glanced around. The other Mounties were chatting away with their brides, talking as if they'd known each other for ages. Miss Brown didn't seem quite ready for chatting as of yet, and certainly wasn't ready for hugging—Marshall's bride had all but flung herself at him, much to Peter's amusement. Marshall could use a little shaking up. Peter supposed they all could. They'd gotten too stuck in their ways as of late.

He held out his arm for Miss Brown, and they followed along behind the others as they walked to the small church that was situated not far from the train station. Of course, in a town the size of White Fox, everything was situated pretty near everything else. Her green dress swished from side to side as she walked, making a pleasant sound.

Bert and his bride went in first. Peter was about to guide Miss Brown inside, but she tugged at his sleeve. "Just . . . just a moment," she said, sounding a little breathless. "Before we do this, I think you ought to know that when I met Miss Hazel, I'd just been left at the train station by the man I was going to marry. I was very much in love with him, and I can't promise you that I'll ever be able to chase him out of my heart. I'll cook and I'll clean and I'll be a good wife, but I don't know what my feelings for you will be. Love seems a bit out of the question for me right now. I hope you don't mind my candor."

Peter felt a little lurch of disappointment, but he smiled. "We only just met a few minutes ago, Miss Brown, and it would be foolish of me to expect that you'd fall in love with me the second you stepped off the train." Yes, he'd been foolish—that's exactly what he'd wished for. "We'll take it a day at a time, all right?"

She returned his smile. "All right."

"And I appreciate candor. It makes things so much easier." At

least she didn't believe in stringing him along. That was a very admirable quality.

They stepped inside and were scowled at by the pastor, who didn't believe in marriages of convenience, but who performed their ceremony anyway. It was over in just a matter of a few minutes, and that was disappointing to Peter as well. He'd always enjoyed attending weddings with a little more pomp and circumstance and importance assigned to them, but there were no parents or flower girls here, no one to throw rice or confetti at them as they exited the building. Those things weren't necessary, he supposed, but they were nice when they were available.

Once they were back outside, he spotted Miss Hazel chatting with one of the other couples, and he went over and took her arm. "May I speak with you for a moment?" he asked softly.

"Well, of course," she replied. She followed him a few steps away. "What's the matter? Does she have a hideous mole on the end of her nose that I somehow overlooked?"

"No," he replied with a chuckle. "I just need some advice on how to get her to fall in love with me."

Miss Hazel gave him a compassionate look. "You're already well on your way," she replied. "The first step is to fall in love with *her*."

Peter swallowed and nodded. "I do care for her very much already. Isn't that crazy? I only laid eyes on her a few minutes ago."

"It's not crazy at all. It's sweet and romantic, and I'd say that you've got all the instincts you'll need to navigate this relationship. Just show her the tender feelings in your heart. It's not complicated—you'll discover how natural it really is."

"Thank you, Miss Hazel. I just want to make her comfortable. I want her to be happy here."

"And so she will be because you're working toward it on her behalf," Miss Hazel said. "I have every confidence in you."

Peter nodded, tugged down his jacket, and turned back to join his new wife. He wished he felt even a particle of the confidence Miss Hazel spoke of. He'd never been so nervous in his life.

## Chapter Three

Callie couldn't keep up with Peter's long strides as they walked away from the church, and she found herself trotting. After a moment, he seemed to notice, and slowed down to match her stride instead.

"I'm sorry," he said with a chuckle. "I'm not used to walking alongside a woman—it's been a while since I've had the pleasure of a female's company."

"That's all right. I believe my legs are shorter than most. Meaning that I walk slower." Her face grew warm, and she wished there was somewhere to hide. She hadn't meant to call attention to herself that way—her mother would have said it wasn't seemly. Peter didn't seem to notice, though.

When they reached the small cabin where she assumed they'd be living, she wondered if he'd pick her up and carry her over the threshold, but he didn't. In a way, she was relieved. That would have seemed too personal, but at the same time, she'd always dreamed of being carried over the threshold on her wedding day. No . . . she'd always dreamed of *Victor* being the one to carry her. It was a very specific dream.

"I'll head over to the train station and grab your bag while you look around," Peter said. "You'd probably like a few minutes alone to pull faces at my housekeeping skills anyway."

"No, it's not that bad," she replied. It was true that the furniture was arranged in a rather odd way and that the curtains were faded, but she didn't see any obvious dust or dirty dishes. She'd likely want to rearrange the kitchen to be more serviceable, but that could wait for a day.

"That's a relief." He flashed her a grin. "I'll be back in around fifteen minutes, all right? Feel free to poke around, look in the bedroom and the cellar—this is *your* home now." He pulled the door closed behind him and was gone, leaving her standing in the middle of the floor.

Her home.



She pulled in a deep breath and looked around. For better or worse, for richer or poorer, this was her home.

She took off her hat and set it on the table. Peter was everything she'd dared hope he would be. He was handsome, with dark auburn hair and green eyes. He was kind—she felt that after they got to know each other, they'd become friends. And he was strong, which was something she definitely liked. Yes, she believed they'd get along well. If she had to tie her life to someone else's, if she had to endure an existence without love as the castoff flirtation of a selfish man, Peter was an excellent choice.

The town was small, but as she'd looked around, she'd spotted a store, and that was comforting. They wouldn't have to go far for basic necessities. The cabin seemed snug and tight, and there was a stove with an oven. Off to the side was an ice box, and she could see several dishes on the shelves. It looked like he was prepared for a wife. She just hoped he had some herbs and spices as well—or that she could get a good variety from the general store. At any rate, she'd be putting in an herb garden as soon as she could. There was nothing like fresh herbs to perk up a meal.

She found the door that led to the cellar and opened it, then descended the steps carefully. She was sure to wedge the door so it wouldn't slam shut on her—that was one of her greatest fears in life, being trapped somewhere cold and dark. By the light of the lantern she'd found to carry with her, she saw quite a lot of food that had been laid up, and it pleased her immensely. She made a basket out of the front of her dress, filled it with goods, and returned upstairs. She believed she'd have everything she'd need to make a nice supper for their wedding day.

She filled a pot with water and set it on the stove, then washed and cubed some potatoes and dropped them into the water. Then she mixed up some biscuits. She didn't have time to bake a chicken or a roast, but she found some bacon and got it sizzling in the frying pan.

Peter entered the cabin and set her bag on the table, then grinned. "You certainly got right to work. What do you think of the cabin?"

"I actually didn't look around much—I found the cellar, and that

made me realize I was hungry.”

He laughed. “I take my stomach very seriously, so I’m glad to hear that you do too. There will be plenty of time to look around later. Not much more to see, anyway—just the bedroom and the outhouse.”

“The outhouse?”

“That’s right.” He paused. “You’re probably used to indoor plumbing.”

She forced a smile on her face. “I am, but that doesn’t mean I can’t adjust.”

“Well, we won’t be stationed here forever, and maybe our next post will have nicer cabins.”

She could see that he was trying to be kind, and that meant a lot to her. “I’ve faced much tougher things than an outhouse. It will be all right.”

He nodded, then rested his hand on the back of one of the kitchen chairs. “Thank you for coming all the way out here to share your life with me,” he said softly. “This decision can’t have been easy.”

She pulled in a breath. “It wasn’t, but I can see that I ended up in a good place. I hope you like bacon. Of course, if you didn’t, you wouldn’t have it here in your kitchen, so I can just assume that you do.” Gracious. She must sound like a complete nincompoop.

“I do like bacon, but I’m prepared to like anything you make because I’m grateful you’re here. I’m going to take a moment to change and clean up—do you want me to set your bag on the bed?”

“Yes, please,” she replied, not wanting to think about how there was likely just one bedroom. She turned back to the stove and flipped the bacon over. Dinner first, and then they’d figure out all the logistics.

She had the food on the table when Peter came back into the room. He’d put on a fresh shirt, and his hair looked neatly combed. He smelled like soap, and she found herself leaning just a bit closer for another sniff before she scolded herself. She wasn’t here to sniff Mounties. She was here to make biscuits.

They each dished themselves a full serving, but Callie couldn’t eat yet. Not until she had everything off her chest.

“Thank you for being so understanding with me earlier at the chapel,” she said. “I wouldn’t have blamed you if you’d packed me right back on the next train.”

“You’re making it sound as though you’ve done something wrong,” he replied with a chuckle. “That’s not the case, so why should I treat you that way?”

She shrugged. “I don’t suppose any mail-order bride situation is ideal, is it? We all have our pasts and our stories to tell. If you don’t mind, I’d like to tell you mine just so you know where I’ve been and so I don’t feel as though I’m keeping any secrets from you.”

Peter set down his fork and met her gaze. “I’ll listen to anything and everything you want to tell me, but only after you’ve eaten at least five bites of food.”

“What?”

“You’ve been traveling for hours on end, and you’ve just met and married a stranger. To top it off, you made dinner. You need to eat something.”

“I don’t know if I can eat until we’ve talked.”

“Well, I don’t know if I can listen until you’ve eaten. It would seem that we’re at an impasse.”

He didn’t seem the sort of man who would back down. That was likely part of why he’d been made the commander over this post. “Very well. I’ll eat. But I won’t enjoy any of it.”

“Well, that’s too bad because it’s quite enjoyable. I especially like the bit of onion you fried up with the bacon.”

She shook her head in exasperation as she buttered her biscuit and ate it. Then she ate a strip of bacon, and another, and finished her potatoes before she knew what she was doing. Peter had resumed eating as well, but it was obvious that he was watching her, and it made her nervous.

“Have I eaten enough to satisfy you, Mr. Murray?”

He grinned. “I’m appeased. You may proceed.”

She shook her head. “I’m going along with this only because you’re right—I was quite hungry. In future, though, I’ll expect to speak as soon as I have something to say.”

“And so you shall.” He motioned toward her. “I’m all ears.”

“Thank you.” She folded her hands in front of her on the table. “I was an only child, orphaned at age twelve. Well, I assume I’m orphaned—my father left at some point during my eighth year, and when my mother died, he didn’t miraculously show up to claim me. I was taken in, so to speak, by a man and his wife who ran a restaurant in town. She taught me how to cook, and he taught me how to run fast when he was in a temper.”

Peter raised an eyebrow. “Did he beat you?”

“Several times, yes. But after a while, I learned how to stay on his good side.”

Peter pressed his lips together. “A man who would beat a child . . . I’m sorry. Please, go on.”

Callie’s heart warmed that he immediately leaped to her defense. “I stayed there until I was fifteen. By then, I’d learned how to run the kitchen as well as the owner’s wife could do it, and I was hired on by another restaurant in town.”

“So, you’re telling me that you’re actually a cook? It’s not just a fluke that you created this marvelous meal out of the simple things I had laying around?”

“I’m a cook.”

He grinned. “This day just gets better and better. But I’m sorry—I keep interrupting you.”

“That’s all right.” She couldn’t blame him for being enthused. He was probably more than sick of cooking for himself all the time. “I worked there until one of the waitresses decided she had it in for me. She accused me of stealing food from the kitchen. I had no way to prove my innocence, but she had no way to prove my guilt. I avoided any sort of jail time, but I lost my job.”

“My goodness.” Peter moved as though he’d take her hand across the table, but his fingers stopped just shy of hers. “You’ve been through so much.”

She lifted a shoulder, unused to being shown compassion. It felt odd, like the words were directed at someone else and not her. “After that, I was fortunate enough to be at the market and overhear a

conversation between a woman and her friend. She worked at a mansion in town and needed to bring on an assistant cook, and was having trouble finding anyone sufficiently qualified. I introduced myself, she agreed to give me a try, and that's where I've worked ever since."

"But that wasn't a happy ending either," Peter said. "Otherwise, you wouldn't be here with me."

"That's right." Callie picked up her fork and toyed with it. Telling the story of her misfortunes wasn't difficult—it was simply a recounting of her life experiences. However, telling how she'd been duped would be bruising to her ego.

"This family had a son named Victor." It couldn't hurt to use his real name, especially when she hadn't mentioned the family name. "He was tall and dashing, very charming, and I met him as I was passing down a back hallway with my arms full of tablecloths. He took some of them from me and carried them to the laundry for me. I didn't know who he was at the time—it was my first day, and I thought he might have been one of the footmen. We talked for a few minutes and he invited me to go out on a walk the next day. It wasn't until we got back from that walk that I found out who he was, and I was mortified."

"Is it so bad to go for a walk with the son of the house?" Peter asked.

"If you ask the house, yes, it is." Callie shook her head. "The cook acted as though I'd committed a cardinal sin. She pulled me aside and told me that if I wanted to keep my post, I'd better not step one toe out with him again. I was flabbergasted—I had no idea who he was and I told her so, but she didn't believe me."

"And she didn't know you well enough yet to trust you," Peter supplied.

"Exactly. She was going to fire me on the spot, but she needed kitchen help so badly that she decided to give me another chance. The next time I saw Victor, I told him we couldn't see each other again, but he said he'd find a way, and that he couldn't let me go so easily. I was terrified, but I was also secretly pleased—I'd fallen in love with

him on that first walk when I had no idea who he really was. And knowing that he'd fight for me or do whatever it took to be with me . . . well, it was thrilling and romantic and all those other things girls dream of when they're young and silly."

Peter leaned back in his chair. "I don't know if it's silly to want romance."

"It seems plenty silly to me now." Callie finally pushed her fork away, realizing she was probably annoying Peter with her fidgeting. "We fell in love hard and fast—the whole thing was like a tornado, swooping us up and carrying us off. We'd meet up when I was sent on errands, and he'd do my shopping with me. It was funny, really—he'd wear an old coat and hat so no one would recognize him, but I'm sure they did anyway. If word got back to the house, though, we didn't know about it because nothing ever seemed to happen."

"You were never punished?"

"No one said a thing. I thought we were getting away with it." She wasn't sure if that was her first big mistake or her twentieth. It was so hard to look back and try to determine where she had gone wrong. "Around this same time, Victor began dropping hints about our relationship becoming more physical. I explained to him that I would have a ring on my finger before any such thing happened. He told me he admired that and he stopped bringing it up, but then he proposed a few days later."

Peter raised an eyebrow. She wondered if he had suspicions about Victor's integrity, but if he did, he didn't say anything.

"His parents hated the idea and threatened to have me sent off unless we changed our plans. Victor said that we'd pretend to go along with their wishes, but we'd elope, and then there would be nothing they could say, as we were both of age. We chose a day to elope when we believed his father would be out of town, but he found us at the train station, told Victor that his money would be cut off if he married me, and I was left there on the platform for Miss Hazel to find." Callie pulled in a deep breath, aware that she'd been talking for a really long time. "And that's how I came to be here."

Peter shook his head, and she wondered what he was thinking.

Was he sorry that he'd married someone with such a checkered past? She'd done her best in every situation, but it was enough to make someone question their choices.

"You're quite a lady," he said at last. "I know half a dozen men who would have fallen apart if they'd been through half as much."

"You almost sound proud of me," she replied, knowing that couldn't be the case.

"I am proud of you. In fact, I'm beyond proud. I might even be smug."

"Smug?"

"That's right. I'm going to walk into the Mountie station tomorrow knowing that I ended up with the best bride of the lot, and they're not going to know what to do with me. I might even get thrown in the snow for my cocky attitude."

"Would they do that?"

He seemed to reconsider. "Well, probably not, because it's on my recommendation that they receive pay raises and such. But they'll definitely *want* to throw me in the snow, and that's good enough for me."

Callie smiled. "You're doing it again."

"Doing what?"

"Being kind to me. Accepting what I have to say."

"Why wouldn't I be kind to you? Callie, is it so hard to believe that you deserve to be treated well? It's as if you expect me to judge you."

She looked down at the table. "I suppose that's what I'm used to. Then when I met Victor, and he was kind to me, well . . . I fell for it. I thought I'd finally found someone who saw me for who I was, and I even defended him to his father there at the last minute. But on the train, I thought about everything that had happened, and I could see how it had all been a long lie. He didn't love me. He didn't even want to marry me. What are the odds that we actually would have made it to a church once we'd arrived in Montreal? He had a plan, and he meant to execute it. His father probably saved me by coming when he did, and I should be grateful for that."

“And this note of self-recrimination I hear in your voice?” Peter asked.

“I should have seen it. I should have known. If I’d listened to Cook, if I’d been wiser . . .”

“No.” Peter held up a hand. “You need to stop this. Callie, I don’t care. It’s in the past, and we have our whole future ahead of us. We will build it together one day at a time, one moment at a time. We can’t change what happened, but we don’t need to. It’s really not important.”

She looked into his face. He seemed in earnest, and she so wanted to believe him. “You’re not angry with me?”

“Why on earth would I be angry? You were duped by a conniving man, someone who had probably used those same tricks a dozen times before and was practiced at it. The only person I’m angry with is him. Well, him and everyone else who has treated you poorly. I swear to you, I will never treat you that way, and I will protect you with all that I am for the rest of your life.”

Callie wasn’t expecting the tears that filled her eyes at his words. He meant everything he’d said—she could feel that down to her marrow. This man would be at her side no matter what—no amount of money or loss of power would change that for him. She picked up her napkin and wiped her eyes. “Thank you,” she said. “I don’t know how . . .”

Just then, her gaze flicked over Peter’s shoulder to the window, and she caught sight of a huge face staring in through the pane. She screamed, jumping backwards and knocking her chair over as she scrambled to get away.

Peter whirled and looked at the window, then stepped around the table and helped her off the floor. “It’s all right,” he said, trying to help sort through the tangle of material that was her dress. Her ridiculous dress that Victor had purchased for her, that was the only nice thing she’d owned for a wedding gown. “It’s just Chip.”

“What do you mean, it’s just Chip?” she asked, pushing her hair back from her face. Not only was her dress twisted, but her hair was coming out of its pins. Chip had a lot to answer for, whoever he was.



“Come here. Let me introduce you.” Peter held out his hand, and she took it. It was both strong and tender at the same time, and she liked it immediately. He led her over to the front door and opened it, then stepped through. She followed hesitantly. “That,” he said, “is Chip.”

Milling around in their yard was a huge bison, acting as though he didn’t have a thing to do in the world but peer into windows. “Is that a buffalo or a bison?” she asked, now second-guessing herself.

“Well, he’s technically a bison, but his name is funnier if you refer to him as a buffalo at least once,” Peter replied with a grin.

“And what if I think his name is horrid and unfortunate, and I refuse?”

He gave her hand a little squeeze. “Then he’d be one sad, sad buffalo.”

She shook her head, unable to resist. He wanted her to go along with it so badly. “Fine. He’s a buffalo named Chip.”

“See? That wasn’t so hard, was it?”

“It was actually painful, but I suppose I’ll survive.”

“Good girl.”

## Chapter Four

It had been all Peter could do to remain still while Callie told her story. He'd never wanted to track down a man and punch him more in his entire life, but he knew she needed his understanding, not his vengeance. Peter had been raised to treat women with respect, and he was always surprised to be reminded that not all men felt the same way he did. He had a wonderful mother and sister, and now a sweet wife, and these relationships made it all the more important to him that he protect womankind to the best of his ability at every opportunity.

Now, as he looked at his bride standing in the yard, her hands on her hips, contemplating Chip the Buffalo, he smiled. Fate had blessed him richly. He was being given a chance to make a real mark on the world, not only through his work as a Mountie, but in his duty as a husband, showing this woman that she was worthy of love and kindness and every other good gift he could give her. Restoring her belief in herself—if she ever had any to begin with—might be more valuable than anything he'd ever do with his uniform.

“Does this happen often? Wild animals wandering into town, peeking into windows?”

“We do get a fair number of wild animals. Chip seems to be the only one who peeks in windows, though, and I'm not sure he's actually wild. He's around people enough that he seems pretty tame.”

“But he's huge! What if he woke up in a bad mood one day? He could trample a grown man quite easily.”

She had a point, but he didn't want her worried. “Most of the men around here carry a pistol as a matter of course, and if they ever needed to defend someone against Chip, or any other animal, they wouldn't hesitate. It's just part of living out here.”

She shuddered, and without thinking, he draped his arm around her shoulders and pulled her close. “I don't want the animals to get *killed*, necessarily,” she said. “I just don't want anyone else to get hurt either.”

"I can't promise you a perfect world, but I can promise that we Mounties are doing everything we can to keep everyone in this town safe." A breeze picked up, and with it, the faintest smell of snow. He shook his head. He'd thought they were heading into spring, but apparently not.

"Let's go inside," he said. "It's getting cold out here."

She let him keep his arm around her shoulders until they were inside, then she stepped away and began clearing the table. "When can I plant an herb garden? I saw a nice patch of ground out there that would be perfect for it." She paused. "Will I be able to get seeds here?"

"I don't see why not. The store has a catalog for special orders if they don't have what you want in stock." He was already missing her in his arms and wanted to pull her back into his embrace. *Patience. You don't see anything you need to forgive her for, but she's still trying to forgive herself.*

"And planting time?"

"That's a different question. Spring comes whenever it has a mind to. I'd say to wait until you see the first real blades of new grass poking through the ground."

She nodded. "But I could order the seeds now, couldn't I?"

"Of course. Just put them on my account at the store. Along with anything else you think we need."

She set the last dishes near the sink, then turned to face him. "What would you think of new curtains? I don't mean to make Chip feel bad, but the face in the window . . . Honestly, I thought we were about to be murdered. He looked like some sort of deranged lunatic with a full brown beard and creepy, beady eyes . . . I'd just as soon never go through that again."

Peter laughed. "Yes, I think we could use some new curtains. I'm sure there's something you can use at the store."

"Thank you." She held up both hands. "I just . . . honestly."

Peter didn't know who this Barbara woman was that Miss Hazel had originally chosen out for him. All he knew was that Callie was capturing his mind, soul, and heart, and he would do whatever it took

to show her that she could be blissfully happy here with him, much happier than she would have been with that rich fancy pants she'd planned to marry.

Callie set to work washing the dishes, and Peter fetched a pair of socks from his drawer and sat down near the fire, lighting an extra lantern to see by. When Callie was finished, she came and sat in the other chair near him, but paused when she saw what he was doing.

"Are you darning that sock?" she asked, her voice incredulous.

He held it up for her inspection. "Yes. Am I doing it wrong?"

"No. In fact, you're doing it very well. I'm just surprised—I've never seen a man darn his own socks before."

"Bert's first wife, Sally, taught me how. I'm terribly hard on socks, and she figured it was easier to teach me how to mend them than to teach me not to wear them out."

"I'm glad to hear that because I have a secret. I may be a good cook, but I really, really hate darning socks."

He looked up and caught a twinkle in her eye. She was becoming more relaxed as the evening went on, and that was something he was glad to see. Perhaps falling off her chair in the middle of the floor had done something to break loose her natural reserve, or maybe she just needed to get her story off her chest. Whatever it was, he was glad for it. "I promise to darn all my own socks for the entire duration of our lives together."

"Why wasn't that included in the wedding vows?" she asked.

"I don't know, but it should have been." He smiled, loving the way she smiled in return. "Sally also put up the food in the cellar. She tried to teach me, but I can only learn so much at once."

"She sounds like a good woman."

"She really was. We were all heartbroken when she died." Peter cleared his throat. Some emotions were harder to overcome than others. "Madelyn seems like a nice girl, though."

"She really is. I spoke with her for a while on the train—she's so eager to raise those little girls as her own."

"That eases my mind. We've all pitched in and done what we could, but we're just bumbling men—we may love those little girls

like they're ours, but we don't know how to mother them."

"I'm sure they love you just as much in return." She set her chair rocking, and he admired the peaceful look that had crossed her face.

"Tell me about the other girls," he said. "How did you all get along on your trip?"

"Well, you met Ida and her daughter, Lily," Callie replied. "Ida's a widow, and her daughter's recovering from cleft palate surgery. They're both a little withdrawn—I get the feeling that they've been through quite a bit, although they didn't share much of their story. Ida's calm and levelheaded, and Lily's a sweetheart. She's ready to have a new daddy."

"And I think Andrew's ready to be one," Peter replied. "It's been all he could talk about since we heard you were coming."

"I'm so glad. They deserve a fresh start. The other girl is Colleen. I got to know her the best on our trip—she's very free and open, and she makes me laugh. She kept me from brooding over Victor by coming up with various different diseases to afflict him with."

"Diseases?"

"Yes, like, scurvy toad disease. You get a whole bunch of warts, and then you die."

She said it with such relish, he couldn't help but grin. "That sounds well deserved."

"Definitely, but my favorite was never-ending hiccoughing. You just hiccough forever until you die."

"All these diseases end in death?"

"Absolutely. That's the whole reason for them."

"I see." He tied off the end of his work and snipped the excess with the scissors. "It sounds like I missed out on a fun game."

"Colleen came up with it. I'm so glad she was on that train—I would have cried the whole way here without her, and that frustrates me because I'm really not a crier. In fact, I think I've cried fewer than ten times my whole life until now."

Peter nodded. He could tell that she was the sort to face her trials with good humor, which made him all the angrier at Victor. A man should never make a woman cry—not if he could help it. There were

some women who just cried all the time anyway. Callie definitely didn't seem like that type.

"So, did you want to look at the rest of the house?" he asked. "There's a closet there, and a bedroom at the back."

"In a minute," she replied. "I'm enjoying the warmth of the fire and just relaxing in this chair. I'm so glad to be here—I thought the train ride would never end."

As eager as Peter was to show her the rest of the house, he couldn't begrudge her a few more minutes. He put away his socks and sat down again, willing to wait as long as it took.

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How many times was Peter going to mention the bedroom? Callie thought back—he'd brought it up four times now. Four! She mentally shook her head. She shouldn't have told him about Victor's intentions, and how she'd insisted on being married first. Now she was married to Peter, and he was definitely thinking about it. He seemed perfect in every other way, but it seemed that he was completely lacking in patience in this one area. This one fairly important area.

She wasn't sure how she wanted to handle this situation. She didn't want to hurt his feelings—he'd been very good to her all day. But how could she explain that she just wasn't ready?

She'd go into the bedroom and look around. Maybe there was room on the floor and she could make a bed from spare blankets. Or she could sleep by the fire. She wouldn't dream of asking him to sleep on the floor—this was his house, despite his insistence that it was hers. It would probably be months before she felt any sense of ownership here.

She stood up, deciding to wander that direction without making a big deal out of it. She took one of the kitchen lanterns with her as she passed by, holding it up as she entered the other room. And then she stopped dead in her tracks, and Peter bumped into her from behind.

"I'm so sorry," he said. "I wanted to see your reaction—I didn't realize I was following so closely."

"That's all right," she replied, distracted by what she saw. Instead of one large bed like she'd been expecting, there were two smaller

beds, one on either side of the room, with space to walk between them.

“Two beds?” she asked, turning to face him.

“Two beds,” he replied. He took the lantern from her, set it on the dresser, then gathered her fingers up into his. “I believe that sharing a bed is the deepest act of trust between a man and a woman, and that it’s not something to be taken lightly or rushed into. As we come to know each other, those seeds of trust will be planted, and when the time is right, we can scoot the beds together. But for tonight and for as long as you say, this is how we’ll sleep.”

She was so flabbergasted, she almost couldn’t reply. “I . . . I can’t believe you did this for me.”

“I hoped you’d like it. I’ve been trying to get you in here all day so I could surprise you, but you were showing me the quality of your heart and making me dinner before you thought of anything else.”

“Or I was avoiding coming into the bedroom,” she said honestly. “Peter, the fact that you thought of this . . . I’m more touched than I can say. Thank you.”

“It’s what I truly believe—this isn’t just for you,” he replied. “I want our marriage to be strong, to be built on a solid foundation. We’ll know when the time is right.”

She reached up and laid a hand on his cheek. “Yes, we will. Thank you again.”

## Chapter Five

Callie slept better that night than she had in days. Trains weren't the best place to catch forty winks, that was for sure. She'd thought that it might be awkward, climbing into bed with Peter just across the room, but his rhythmic breathing comforted her and lulled her to sleep.

When she woke up the next morning, she was a little disoriented. She looked around the room, not recognizing it in the daylight, as she'd only seen it by lantern light the night before. It wasn't large, but the dresser seemed accommodating, and there were nails in the wall where she could hang her dresses. The night before, she'd draped her dress over the back of a chair, not caring about details. Today, she wanted to go through the whole house and organize it to her satisfaction, and that meant lots of details.

She heard the front door open and close. She was startled until she leaned to the side and caught a glimpse of Peter carrying a bucket of water into the kitchen. She'd wanted to be up early to make him a nice breakfast, but she'd been so worn out after traveling, it was no wonder that she had slept so long.

"Peter?" she called out. "When do you leave for work?"

"I need to be there in about ten minutes."

"What?" She leaped out of bed, grabbing her robe and throwing it around her shoulders. "I was going to make you breakfast."

"You did. I ate last night's leftovers from the icebox." He gave her a smile. "Don't worry about it. You can make it up to me tomorrow."

"I will. I promise."

He paused and put a hand on her shoulder. "And if you don't, I'll just raid the icebox again. Have a good day."

He put on his hat and left, pulling the door closed snugly behind him. The small cabin wasn't just emptier by one body—it felt emptier of someone's calming influence, too. She knew she'd miss him, which surprised her after knowing him for less than a day. It seemed so much longer than that, though. A great deal had happened, more than



usually happens in the space of several hours.

She washed up and got dressed, putting on a simple shirtwaist and skirt that would do very well for the chores she had in mind. Then she hung up her green dress and unpacked her other things. The two top dresser drawers were empty, and she assumed they'd been cleared out for her. She placed her things inside, embarrassed that some of her underthings were a little shabby, but she could see about getting some fabric to replace those as well. Now that she wasn't working for someone else, she could determine how to spend her time.

She paused at that thought and pulled in a deep breath as goose bumps raced down her arms. She wasn't working for someone else. She was working in her own home, for her own husband, and she could decide what tasks to do from day to day. The thought thrilled her. She'd never had that kind of freedom before.

After she unpacked, she slid her bag under her bed, made her bed, and then turned to make Peter's to see that he'd already done it. This was almost getting ridiculous—didn't the man have any faults? She'd been irritated with him the night before for the way he kept bringing up the bedroom, but then she'd realized that he'd just wanted to show her that he'd provided her with her own bed, a special surprise created because of his respect for her. She couldn't be irritated with him after that. It seemed that he was as perfect as a human being could possibly be, and that raised some alarms in her head—no one was *that* perfect. He was going to snap at some point—he'd have to. It wasn't sustainable.

First things first. She looked in the icebox and found that he'd left her two biscuits and some bacon. She broke the biscuits in half, put the bacon in the middle, and ate while she looked at the food available, deciding what she needed. She found some paper and a pencil and took inventory of the things in the cellar, then sat at the kitchen table and drew up a menu using things that were already on hand. She actually had quite a lot to work with, once it was sketched out.

She drew up another list of things she'd look for at the store, then grabbed her heavy shawl and headed outside. She would have liked to

start some bread before leaving, but yeast was one thing in short supply.

The fabric selection at the mercantile wasn't extensive, but she found everything she wanted—something nice and dark for the windows, and a very nice white for her new underthings. Her cheeks felt hot as the clerk cut the yardage she needed, but she realized, everyone had to make new underthings from time to time, and it's not like she was putting her purchase on display. She found the yeast without difficulty and put a few other things in her basket as well, including some fresh meat.

As she rounded the corner, she overheard two men talking. They were leaning up against the counter and didn't seem too concerned about keeping their voices down, so she didn't feel guilty as she listened.

"Yep, they're ruthless, all right," one of the men said. "I don't think there's one lick of the fear of God in 'em."

"That's what happens when your belly gets full of greed. You don't care who you hurt no more."

"You figgur'n they'll head this way?"

"Don't see why not. Rumor has it, they're hittin' every train they can find to hit. Why should we be any different?"

Callie pulled in a breath. This sounded bad—so very bad.

"Can I help you, miss?" the man behind the counter asked.

"Yes, please. I need to put these things on Peter Murray's account." She set her basket on the counter as the two men stepped to the side.

"So you're the new Mrs. Commander," one of them said. "It's a pleasure to know you, ma'am."

"Thank you," she replied, unsure how to take his greeting. He seemed friendly enough, but definitely a little rough around the edges. Things like that had never bothered her before, though, so she didn't know why it should matter now.

Her bill was tallied and added to the ledger, and she smiled and nodded as she gathered up her basket again. Then she crossed the muddy ground quickly, needing to see Peter.

She wiped her feet on the mat outside before opening the door to the Mountie office. When she entered, the two men inside rose.

“Is everything all right, Callie?” Peter asked. Andrew nodded in greeting.

“I don’t know,” she said. She set her basket down in the corner and approached the desk where her husband was working. “I was just at the store, as you can see because my basket is full, and I overheard two men talking about ruthless, godless men who might be coming this way. What’s going on?”

Peter and Andrew exchanged looks. “I’d rather you didn’t know about this quite yet, but I suppose we can’t keep it a secret forever,” Peter replied. He motioned for Callie to take a seat, and she did, feeling apprehensive about what she might hear. “Several train robberies have taken place in the area, and we received word that one Mountie in another post was shot and killed.”

Callie didn’t say anything, but she pressed her hand to her heart.

“We’ve been studying the pattern of the robberies, and it’s not unlikely that they’ll attempt something here.”

“I think we should set up a trap,” Andrew said. “Lure them here and then arrest them.”

“But that idea carries dangers of its own,” Peter continued smoothly, his calm voice overriding Andrew’s impassioned speech. “We should be alert and mindful, not foolhardy.”

“I don’t think it’s foolhardy to take matters into our own hands,” Andrew insisted, and Callie thought it sounded like a conversation they’d had many times before. No doubt they’d been discussing it for hours at a time, deciding what course to take.

“We’ve kept this quiet because we didn’t want you ladies to be brought into town right in the center of a crisis,” Peter went on. “I’ll ask you not to say anything just yet, Callie. I know that’s hard because these brides are your friends, but we need more information before we can say anything definitive.”

“All right. I won’t say anything.” It would be hard, that was true, but she knew it would be easier for the other girls to accept the situation if there are concrete facts attached and not just a bunch of

speculation. She could hold her tongue until things were more explained.

"Thank you. I appreciate that." Peter didn't say more, but Callie understood that it was time for her to go. No doubt he had many pressing things to do that didn't include entertaining his wife.

"I'll see you later," she said, standing. "I'm making beef stew for dinner."

"I can't wait," he replied, and she picked up her basket and left. Her heart still ached for the loved ones of the Mountie who had been killed. What would she or any of her friends do if something like that happened in White Fox?

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"I don't know how much longer we can keep from discussing this with our wives," Andrew said as Callie pulled the door shut behind her.

"I think we can tell them fairly soon. We just want to stay calm about it. We're officers of the law, and they married us knowing full well that we encounter danger on a regular basis. They need to get used to the notion."

"I'm sorry your wife had to find out about it at the general store," Andrew said. "I'm sure that wasn't the most pleasant way."

For a small moment, Peter wondered if Andrew was rebuking him for the delay in informing their wives, but then he realized that his friend was concerned about Callie's welfare. Peter had been rebuking *himself*. "You get a bunch of men together and the talk's likely to turn to unladylike topics," he said. "We can't keep it from them forever, but we can assure them that they're safe. That's about the extent of the promises we can make, though."

"True. Very true." Andrew stood up and grabbed his hat. "Going on rounds. See you in a bit."

Peter nodded, then bent back to his paperwork. The never-ending pile. At least today, he had the prospects of a hot meal and a sweet wife to look forward to.

## Chapter Six

The first thing Callie did when she got back to the cabin was to set the yeast in some warm water. While it worked, she put away her purchases, setting the fabric on her bed. She was eager to begin her sewing, but that would wait until she had some proper food in progress. Once the bread was mixed and set to rise, she turned her attention to chopping vegetables for stew, but was startled at a knock on her door.

Miss Hazel stood outside, her eyes twinkling merrily. “And here you are!” she said. “I’m visiting all my new brides today, and it’s your turn.”

“I’m sorry if you came by earlier and missed me,” Callie said, stepping aside to let the woman enter. “I went over to the general store for a few minutes.”

“That’s quite all right. I’m really in no rush.” Miss Hazel looked around the room and nodded. “Much the same as the other cabins, but I imagine you’ll put your own touch on it soon enough.”

“I certainly plan to. I got some new fabric for curtains.” Callie paused. “Miss Hazel, have you met Chip?”

“The buffalo?” the older woman laughed uproariously. “Yes, I certainly have, and I’d love to know who came up with that brilliant name. I don’t think I could have done better myself, and I have a penchant for naming things.”

“I don’t care for his name, but I *really* don’t care for the way he looks through windows. He scared me right out of my chair during dinner last night. I bought new fabric for curtains just now, and I’m getting them sewn up as quickly as I can.”

“He’s definitely a nuisance, I’ll grant him that.” Miss Hazel took a seat by the fireplace. “I wonder if I could trouble you for some tea.”

“Of course you could. Please excuse my manners—I should have offered you some as soon as you came in.” Callie busied herself with the kettle. “You say you’ve been out visiting?”

“I have indeed. This is my reward for what I do—seeing happy

couples preparing to spend their lives together. I also love it when they write to me a few months down the road and assure me that they're still basking in wedded bliss. It's so comforting to know that one is right so much of the time."

Callie smiled. Miss Hazel wasn't trying to sound in the slightest bit conceited—she spoke very simply, as though it was all an accepted fact. She handed the woman a cup of tea and sat across from her.

"Tell me what you think of Peter," Miss Hazel said after she'd swallowed a few sips.

"I think he's wonderful. He's kind, considerate, strong—he thinks of everything. Miss Hazel, he put two beds in the bedroom. Have you ever heard of anything more considerate?"

Miss Hazel smiled. "He's a good man, that Peter. You still seem a bit troubled, though. What's the matter?"

Callie let out an exasperated breath. "You're going to think I'm ridiculous, but I'm starting to get annoyed by his perfection. He was up before me this morning and fetched fresh water without being asked, he ate leftovers for breakfast without a single complaint or even waking me, and right now, he's down at the Mountie office looking incredibly handsome in his uniform and giving orders and being in charge, and that's so attractive. Miss Hazel, he *darns his own socks*."

"No!" The woman looked suitably scandalized. "He doesn't!"

"Yes, he does, and he does it better than most women I've seen." Callie sat back, feeling as though that explained everything that needed to be explained. "Where is the flaw in this man?"

"He snores!" Miss Hazel said.

"No, he breathes. And not loudly."

"Does he pick his teeth at the table?"

"No."

"Does he come to the table in his undershirt?"

"He put on a clean shirt and combed his hair."

Miss Hazel looked baffled. "You must have married an immortal being. That's the only explanation I can think of."

"Exactly! And what am I to expect from this pillar of perfection? I

certainly can't keep up with him, and everyone will pity him. Poor Commander Murray—he's such a wonderful man. How did he end up with such an unfortunate wife?"

The two contemplated the issue for a long moment.

"Perhaps if you looked," Miss Hazel said. "Really looked. He must have flaws—he's just hiding them well. He can't keep it up forever, though. No one can keep a secret that long."

"You're right. I'll be on the alert." Callie smiled at the older woman. "I'm very glad you found me on that train station platform, Miss Hazel. I'm not sure what life will bring me here in White Fox, but I know I would have been miserable with Victor if I'd gone with him. I've thought it over quite thoroughly, and I've realized just what a manipulator he was."

"Long train rides are excellent for thorough thinking," Miss Hazel replied. "I'm just so grateful you were there for me to find. I want the Murrays to have the very best, and I believe Peter has found that in you. Don't be disheartened, dear. You'll find something wrong with him eventually, and then you'll be able to fall head over heels in love with him and start having dozens of auburn-haired babies."

"Dozens?" Callie asked as her cheeks began to burn. She wasn't ready to think about having babies, but she was even less ready to consider dozens of them.

"You pick how many." Miss Hazel stood up and put her cup on the table. "I need to be on my way. I'm glad to see you looking rested, my dear. You must have had pleasant dreams."

"I did, because my perfect husband let me sleep in." Callie shook her head. "I'll keep looking, Miss Hazel. I'll find those flaws if it's the last thing I do."

"And then you'll write me and tell me all about it." Miss Hazel gave her a hug. "Take care, my dear."

"You too, Miss Hazel. Have fun with your next set of brides."

"I always do."

After Miss Hazel left, the cabin certainly seemed a bit more dreary—she had a way of lighting things up wherever she went. Callie went back to chopping vegetables and getting the stewpot simmering. She'd

been able to put the train robbers out of her mind during Miss Hazel's visit, but now that she was on her own again and doing a task that didn't require much thought, she found herself worried again.

The other brides had known for a while that they were going to be married to law enforcement officers. They'd had time to prepare themselves for the idea. Callie, however, barely had time to consider anything at all before she said "I do," and the ramifications of that decision were just now starting to make themselves known to her. She had married a man who could be shot and killed at any moment. She could become a widow even faster than she had become a wife.

Thankfully, the town of White Fox didn't seem particularly dangerous as a general rule, but train robbers could come from anywhere and show up anywhere, and if they could, what was to keep other criminals from doing the same?

Callie gave a few extra frustrated thumps to her bread dough and put it into loaf pans. Peter had thought of everything—she'd found every pan and bowl and tool she'd needed as she worked. She was already outlining in her mind how she'd reorganize everything, but truth be told, she needed more distractions, and Colleen was the perfect person to call upon.

Callie made sure that the fire in the stove wasn't too high and then grabbed her shawl. Colleen and Marshall's cabin was just a short distance away, and she should be able to pay a call and return before the stew was done.

"I'm so glad you came by," Colleen said when she opened her door. She grabbed Callie's wrist and all but dragged her inside. "What do you think of our cabins? Yours looks like this one, doesn't it? I think they're all the same, at least in the basic design. Was yours clean? The first thing I did was sweep and dust. It wasn't as bad as it could have been, but it definitely wasn't ready for me to start unpacking or even cooking. These poor men needed us more than they even realized."

Callie smiled as she took the seat Colleen offered. Her friend had more energy than she'd thought could be contained in one person, and that's exactly what she needed—someone to take her thoughts off all



the things that were weighing on her mind.

She stayed as long as she felt she could, and they chatted about everything under the sun. Then she gave Colleen a hug and promised to come back soon, her heart much lighter than it had been before. She slid the bread in the oven, checked on the stew, and had everything ready when Peter walked in the door, just like she'd always been taught a good wife should.

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Peter's feet felt heavy as he walked toward his cabin. His Mountie uniform boots were thicker than many and did weigh him down, but this was something more. Each of his men had spoken with him with their ideas for how they thought they should handle the train robbery situation, and as their commander, it was up to him to decide what their final course of action should be. He strongly felt that they should err on the side of caution rather than taking the bull by the horns, like Andrew wanted to do. Then he glanced up and saw Chip nosing around in some bushes at the tree line, and he chuckled. Maybe they should be taking the buffalo by the horns.

For all they knew, the robbers had moved on in the other direction. Wasn't it borrowing trouble to get all worked up at this point? He'd rather find a little more evidence that they were actually in danger before letting it keep him up at night. That didn't mean he planned to brush it off or be lazy—far from it. He'd sent out a bunch of telegrams that afternoon seeking information from nearby towns and asking them to keep him apprised of any activity or even any rumors, and promised to do the same for them. He'd contacted his head office and asked for any updates that might not have been sent yet. He'd visited with the stationmaster and discussed safety regulations and tactics. He was doing everything he could to stay abreast of the situation—everything but get panicked about it. And that lack of panic was, to some members of the community, a sign that he didn't care at all.

He sighed and kicked at a dirt clod in his path. He knew he couldn't please everyone all the time. He'd known from the moment he received his post that he'd be offending someone just as regularly

as he'd be helping someone else. That's how it was in any leadership position, and that was another thing he'd discussed with his father. But he had to push all that to the side. If he allowed himself to be swayed by every member of the community, he'd never be able to concentrate on doing his actual job.

He cringed. He'd forgotten all about the alleged chicken murder, and he'd forgotten to follow up with Marshall about it. Really, he couldn't be blamed—he'd just gotten married, a Mountie had been killed, and he was in the middle of an investigation. But Mrs. Obregon wasn't likely to see it that way. He'd remind Marshall about it on Monday. Some things simply had to wait.

When he opened the door to his cabin, he paused and took a sniff. The most heavenly aroma filled the air, and Callie stood by the table, smiling. This welcome was such a contrast to the thoughts that had been pressing so heavily on his mind that emotion welled up inside him, and he had to swallow a few times. He hung up his hat, then crossed the floor and took her into his arms in a hug, resting his chin on top of her head. She seemed a little surprised, but she didn't object, and they stood that way for a long minute.

"Thank you," he said when he released her. "You have no idea what it's like to come home to a cabin so warm and friendly when I'm used to it being cold and lonely."

"I really didn't do much," she replied. "I went and visited Colleen this afternoon and didn't get the curtains started."

He blinked at her a few times. "I don't care if you didn't start the curtains—or if you ever start the curtains. I'm just so glad not to be alone anymore." He washed up at the basin in the corner, pleased to find that the water was warm—she'd thought of everything. Then he joined her at the table, where they said grace and began to eat.

"Miss Hazel came by after you left this morning. She said she was just checking in on all of us to make sure we're all right before she headed back to Ottawa."

"I hope she has a safe trip," Peter said as he smeared butter on his bread. "Does she travel by herself often?"

"I don't actually know, but she didn't seem to have any qualms

about it. I told her I was settling in quite well except for one thing.”

“Oh? What’s that?”

“You.”

Peter looked up, surprised. “Have I done something to upset you?”

“No, and that’s exactly the problem. You’re so perfect, I’m worried that you’re not actually real. She encouraged me to watch you very carefully for faults, so if you catch me following you around, taking notes, you’ll know what I’m up to.”

Peter grinned, relieved that it was nothing more serious than that. “Oh, I assure you, I have plenty of faults. Plenty of them.”

“None that you’ve shown me.”

“Then maybe following me around all day is a good idea after all. My men will tell you, I’m far from perfect. But I’d rather know what you think of me—your opinion matters more to me than theirs.”

She lowered her eyes and then raised them again. “I think you’re a good man who’s doing everything in his power to make me happy here. And I know that you’d never hurt me intentionally, and that you’d apologize immediately if something were to happen. It’s only been a day since we met, but you’ve shown me enough of who you are that I trust you.”

He met her gaze and held it. “Thank you. That means a great deal to me. As does this bread. This is the most meaningful bread I’ve ever tasted.”

She chuckled. “Meaningful bread?”

“Very meaningful bread. I knew I’d enjoy whatever you made, but this bread surpasses all my hopes, dreams, and expectations. If we weren’t already married, I’d go down on one knee and propose to you based on this bread alone.”

“My goodness. You’re either extremely hungry, or your past experiences with bread have been pretty dismal.”

“Both, I’d say.” He took another bite and closed his eyes. “Bread. I love bread.”

She outright laughed, and he was delighted by the sound. He wanted to make her laugh every day. “I’m glad you like it so much because I plan to have it on hand as a regular matter of course. I

would have made some last night, but you only had a tiny bit of yeast on hand.”

“We will never run out of yeast again, I swear it.” He finished off his slice and reached for another. He couldn’t believe that something as simple as bread could turn his whole day around. Well, bread and the sweet woman who had made it for him.

## Chapter Seven

Callie felt a little conspicuous walking into church the next morning on Peter's arm. Everyone nudged each other and whispered, but after a moment, she realized that the expressions on their faces were friendly, and they were curious about her as a newcomer in town. This was shown to be true when an older woman approached her after the services and took her hand warmly.

"Welcome to White Fox, Mrs. Murray," she said, her voice thin and reedy. "We're so glad to have you here. We've left you alone for a few days to give you time to settle in, but don't be surprised if you get a lot of visitors this week. We're all quite curious to get to know you, considering that we don't often have people move to our little community, and now we're getting four at once. It's quite a treat."

"You're more than welcome to pay a visit. What was your name?"

"I'm Mrs. Frederick, Mrs. Gladys Frederick. You can bet I'll be by." She gave Callie's hand another squeeze before moving off to meet the next bride, probably giving her much the same welcome and the same speech.

Peter took Callie's arm and steered her around a mud puddle as they walked back home. "Bert gave a fine sermon today," Callie said, grateful for her husband's assistance. She hadn't thought to bring along sturdier boots. "Do the Mounties always preach?"

"Almost always. Sometimes the pastor will take a turn when he's around, but we take turns. It's good for us. Keeps us humble."

She laughed. "Is humility something you're lacking?"

"Oh, in spades. You might put that on your list of my faults. And underline it a few times."

"I have to see it in action before it can go on the list. I need a demonstration."

He looked thoughtful. "Okay, I'll get right on that."

She laughed again, and they wiped their feet carefully before entering the cabin.

She served up chicken and dumplings for lunch, which Peter said

he adored, and then he said something else that simply flabbergasted her. “Why don’t we take a Sunday afternoon nap?”

She blinked, not sure she’d heard right. “A nap?”

“Yes. It’s this strange thing people do where they lie down, close their eyes, and go to sleep in the middle of the day. Most find it quite refreshing.”

She shook her head. “Of course I know what a nap is. I’m just . . . well, no one’s ever suggested I take one before. They usually have tasks for me instead.”

“It’s Sunday. You’d do tasks on Sunday?”

“Depending on where I was . . .” She didn’t want to tell him that she hadn’t been allowed a proper Sunday in years. It would only perturb him—she’d learned quickly that he was easily perturbed by hearing how she’d been treated in the past. It was endearing, but she didn’t want to add to his burdens.

He stood up and held out his hands. “Come with me.”

She wasn’t sure about this, but she took his hands and let him pull her up. Then he led her into the bedroom, nudged her to sit on the bed, and he knelt down and unfastened her shoes. “Now lie down,” he said, picking up the spare blanket that was folded at the foot of the bed. As soon as she lay back, he covered her up. “Sleep,” he whispered. Then he stepped out of her line of sight, and the creak of a bed told her that he was lying down as well.

At first, it felt ridiculously odd, being in bed in the middle of the day when she wasn’t the slightest bit sick. But then she grinned as the deliciousness of it washed over her. She was taking a nap. Because it was a nice thing to do. She giggled, unable to help herself.

“That good, huh?” Peter asked, amused.

“Yes,” she replied. “I feel so . . . decadent.”

He laughed. “I take a nap every Sunday I’m not on duty.”

“Well then, so do I.” She allowed her eyes to close and her muscles to relax. This . . . this was a little piece of heaven.

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The air was crisp on Monday, and Callie decided that she’d like to stock up on coffee and tea against the harsher weather she sensed

coming. A quick trip to the general store took care of that need, and as she added her packages to Peter's account, the shopkeeper surprised her by bringing a package out from behind the counter.

"Commander Murray asked me to check the back room for these, and sure enough, I found them," he said. "Here you are, Mrs. Murray."

"Are you sure this is for me?" Callie asked. She couldn't remember Peter saying anything about a special request.

"Sure am."

She took the parcel along with her purchases, curious to know what was inside, and as soon as she got back to the cabin, she sliced the twine that held the brown paper in place. Inside was a pair of nice, stout boots, and they looked to be her size. They were made of the softest leather she'd ever touched.

She held them to her chest for a long moment, her eyes brimming with tears. Why was God blessing her so immensely? What had she done to deserve this? She'd been given a man who noticed her needs and sought to fill them even when she hadn't said a word. She'd meant to dip into the money Mr. Vanderbilt had given her to buy herself some boots, but Peter had noticed and he'd simply taken care of it. She'd never dreamed that she would find a man who would care so deeply about her comfort and her welfare, and yet, here he was. And he was hers.

She sniffed and wiped away her tears. He'd said that she'd made his life so much better just by being there, but he was returning that gift over and over and over again. Maybe this was what marriage was really about—each person looking to the other's needs and being mindful of what those needs actually were. Peter didn't want a wife who was constantly busy every second—he wanted a wife who was there, who was present, whether making bread or taking a nap. She could do that, and it was so easy—he *made* it easy to be near him.

She tucked the boots away, deciding that her old shoes would be best for around the house and the boots would be for going outside. Then she started more bread, mixed up some corn bread, and put some salt pork to soaking. Her husband was going to get a wonderful dinner that night. She had to show him how very much his care meant

to her.

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Callie woke up with a start in the middle of the night. She didn't know at first what had awakened her, and she sat there, trying to sort it out. Then she heard it again.

"Peter?" she said into the darkness.

"Yes?"

"What's that noise? It sounds like Chip's trying to climb in the window."

He chuckled. "It does sound like it, but no, that's a blizzard."

"But it's supposed to be spring! I thought maybe we'd have a little flurry or two, not a full-out blizzard."

"Maybe to Mother Nature, a blizzard is a little flurry. You can go back to sleep—the cabin is solidly built. We're safe."

Callie pulled the blankets back up to her chin and tried to drift off again, but the howling outside sounded like wolves or banshees trying to get inside. "Peter?"

"Yes?"

"Um . . . maybe . . . you could come over here?" She felt ridiculous asking, but she'd feel so much better if she wasn't alone.

He didn't answer, but crossed the floor and lay down beside her. He stayed on top of her blankets, but he'd brought his own, and he wrapped his arms around her and shared both his warmth and his blankets with her. She turned her face to his chest and breathed in the scent of soap. He stroked her hair back from her face over and over again, almost like he was petting a cat, and she found it soothing. Within minutes, she was asleep, knowing that even if the blizzard tore the entire house to shreds, Peter would keep her safe.



## Chapter Eight

Peter's stomach was in knots. Bert hadn't made it back home before the blizzard hit, and he was out there somewhere in it. There was nothing Peter could do about it, though—he had to trust that Bert's training would kick in and he'd know what to do.

Peter blinked as he looked around the kitchen. Because the blizzard was still raging outside two days after it had started, Callie had decided it was the perfect time to reorganize the kitchen. She explained that she'd been meaning to do it since she got there, and now she could enlist his help. Now there were dishes stacked all over the table and on every surface, and she was up on a chair, washing shelves.

“What am I doing again?” he asked.

She glanced at him over her shoulder. “You're stacking plates with plates, cups with cups, and so forth. But put the like ones together—don't mix the brown in with the blue. Put all the browns together, all the blues together, and so forth.”

He wasn't sure what she'd just said, but he could at least tell the difference between cups and plates. That was a start.

She finished washing the shelves, then climbed down from the chair. “If we put the mixing bowls here, and the soup bowls there, I can reach everything much easier while I'm working,” she said.

A piece of hair had come out from her bun and dangled near her face. She had a smudge of dust on her cheek, and she looked so delightfully earnest, Peter couldn't help himself. He took a step toward her, essentially blocking her from moving to either side. She looked up into his eyes as though challenging him to move, but then her gaze softened. He tucked her hair behind her ear, but let his hand linger by her jaw, tracing it down to her chin. He didn't want to rush things, but there was one thing he knew more than anything else he'd ever known—he loved this woman. He loved everything about her, even the things she disliked about herself. He loved her laugh and he loved her quietness. He loved the way she teased him and the way she

sought his advice. He loved her spirit and he loved her heart.

He studied her eyes. He wanted to kiss her more than he could even explain, but he wouldn't do it unless she was ready. Her breath was coming a little rapidly, probably from nervousness, and he felt the same way. It had been so long since he'd kissed a woman—not since Geraldine Harper's eighteenth birthday. He blinked at the realization. That really had been a long time. He'd been so busy studying, he hadn't given courting a second thought, and now he started to worry that maybe he'd *forgotten* how to kiss. Could you forget something like that?

He cupped her cheek with his hand and stroked her lips with his thumb. It couldn't be too hard to remember. Lips, meet lips. Easy. Unless she didn't want him to kiss her, in which case, it would be wrong no matter how he did it.

He was just about to step back and put an end to his misery when she closed her eyes and leaned forward just the tiniest bit. Ah, there it was . . . the invitation he'd been waiting for. He lowered his mouth to hers, then slid his arms around her waist. It was really hard to judge, since he was the one doing the kissing and not the one being kissed, but it seemed to him that he remembered how after all. She melted into his arms like butter on hot bread, so he must have been doing something right.

When he let her go, she looked a little dazed. "Organizing dishes seems to bring out your romantic side," she said breathlessly.

"I never knew what an effect plates and cups could have on a man," he replied. He was about to say more, but a sudden pounding on the door interrupted him.

Callie's hands flew to her hair, and she tried to smooth it down. "You look beautiful," he whispered in her ear before turning to answer the insistent summons.

Mr. Whittaker stood on the other side, snow sticking to his beard. "Our roof just caved in," he said. "I've got the wife and children snug in the barn, but the roof is pushing outward on the walls of the house, and I'm afraid the whole thing is going to crumble."

Peter nodded. "I'll be there in a few minutes."

“Thank you, Commander. Some of my neighbors are going to help as well.”

“As many hands as we can get.”

The man nodded and headed back out into the storm.

Peter turned and looked at Callie. Her hair was still mussed, despite her efforts to fix it, and the light caught each strand and turned it into gold. “I need to leave,” he said, his voice hoarse.

“I know.” She handed him a bundle. “I wrapped this up while you were talking. Bread for their family.”

“You’re giving away my bread?”

“I’ll make more while you’re gone.”

The look in her eyes reminded him of their kiss, and he caught her up in his arms again. This time, though, it was a goodbye kiss, not a kiss of discovering new emotions. He didn’t know how long he’d be gone. He couldn’t make her any promises. All he could do was assure her that wherever he was, he’d be thinking about her, and that while their feelings might be new, they meant everything to him. He let her go, although he wanted desperately to stay, bundled up as warmly as he could, and headed out into the storm, clutching his tool bag. He couldn’t let a family lose their home, as much as it hurt to leave his.

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It was all Peter could do to see his way to the Whittaker farm. He’d thought about taking the other Mounties, but if Mr. Whittaker’s neighbors were coming too, they should have enough help, and he hated to pull his men away from their new wives. He shook his head. He was too nice to them sometimes, dang it.

When he reached the farm, he located the barn and gave Mrs. Whittaker the gift of bread, then went back out into the stinging wind and snow and fought his way to the house.

“We need to work quickly before nightfall,” he yelled over the howling. “Otherwise, we’ll never get it done.”

Mr. Whittaker and his two friends nodded, and they fell to work moving the roofing material and creating new supports. It didn’t look to Peter as though the house had been constructed all that well to begin with, which frustrated him. If a man is going to build a house in

an area known for blizzard and snowfall, shouldn't he prepare for that from day one? Peter shook his head to chase away the critical thought. His judgment wasn't going to help Mr. Whittaker now. Instead, he put his energy into pounding in pegs and lifting boards into place. He had to brace himself against the wind when he climbed the ladder so he wouldn't get blown off into the snow, and a few times, he had to cling to the roof's edge extra tight against a sharp gale.

It was almost impossible to see. The wind kept shoving snow into his eyes, and his breath was freezing onto his face. He loved Canada, but he was starting to question the advisability of living there any longer. He'd done some reading about Mexico or places with warmer climates. Did they have Mounties in Mexico? He wasn't sure, but he was certainly tempted to find out.

At last, the roof had been repaired. The men climbed down from their precarious perches and went inside to see what damage had been done to the kitchen, using brooms and shovels to move the snow that had piled up on the kitchen floor. It appeared that the house was once again safe.

"I'll come back after the blizzard and we'll make those repairs even more sound," Peter promised, and Mr. Whittaker shook his hand.

"I sure appreciate your help, Commander."

"I was glad to do it. You'll want to go around the entire perimeter of your roof come spring and reinforce it—you don't want this happening again."

The man nodded, the lesson hitting its mark.

Peter stayed long enough to see the family back into their home, then he headed back out into the storm. He'd been invited to spend the night, but he didn't want to leave Callie alone. She'd demonstrated a certain fear of the dark and of loud noises. He certainly didn't mind holding her tight while the wind blew, and getting back to her side was now his top priority.

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Callie listened to the wind, but then decided she'd better *not* listen to the wind. Instead, she'd keep herself busy. She started a new batch

of bread, then decided to make a hearty soup. There were potatoes down in the cellar, and there was some chicken left over in the icebox. Chicken chowder would hit the spot on a miserable day like this, and she wanted something hot and filling for Peter when he came home.

She lit a lantern and climbed down into the cellar, deciding that she'd bring up enough for a couple of days so she wouldn't have to make this descent again the next day. Some jams and jellies were along the north wall, and they'd be delicious on Peter's bread. She chose out the potatoes she wanted and turned to go back up, but just then, the door slammed shut.

She bit back a gasp. She'd forgotten to wedge it open—she'd been thinking too much about what she planned to make. Great.

She climbed up and pushed against the door. It was stuck somehow, and she took a deep breath to gather her strength. Then she tried again. Nothing.

She sent a panicked look at the lantern. She knew it needed to be refilled, but she hadn't done it because she'd only planned to be down here for a few minutes, and she didn't want the extra weight of the oil to carry when she'd be carrying food as well.

She braced herself against the door again and pushed. It was a trap door directly over her head, so it was at the most awkward angle possible, and she wasn't a very big person to begin with. Physical strength wasn't an attribute she naturally had.

She needed to think her way through this.

Peter had gone out in the blizzard and could be gone for quite a while. She knew that when he came home and found her missing, he'd look for her, but she couldn't count on that being any time soon. Plus, he might not think to look for her in the cellar, and if she called out, he might not be able to hear her over the storm.

That meant she needed to save herself.

She looked around the cellar again. Bushel baskets filled with potatoes, a fishing rod, something that looked like a tarp. Onions. She wasn't aware of any magical cellar-opening properties possessed by onions.

The lantern light flickered, reminding her she was running out of

time. She'd once pushed open a wedged door with her feet, but that wasn't possible here—she'd have to stand on the ladder on her hands. It would make for an amusing trick if she were some sort of acrobat. What could she do . . . what could she do . . .

The light went out, and she was plunged into darkness so absolute, it was as though she'd been buried alive. And she could still hear the wind howling outside, although it was muted.

This would be how she died.

She climbed down the ladder and sat at the base of it, bringing her knees to her chest. Peter would come home. Peter would find her. Peter would save her. This would all be over soon. She rocked back and forth, chanting encouraging words, singing hymns, trying to remember any Bible verses . . . her mother had always wanted her to memorize Bible verses, but she'd refused. Now she wished she'd listened.

For an hour she sat this way, and for an hour, absolutely nothing changed. The wind didn't let up, Peter didn't come home, and she didn't feel any less afraid. All she knew was that she was cold, growing colder, and she already knew what she had to do—she had to save herself. No one else was going to do it. If they could, they would have done it already.

She clenched her hands into fists and relaxed them a few times, trying to get feeling back into her chilly fingers. Who goes down into a cellar during a blizzard? People who want to freeze to death, that's who. She stood up and stamped her feet, hanging on to the ladder with one hand so she wouldn't become disoriented. If she did, it would be a simple matter to figure out where she was because the room wasn't huge, but she didn't want to feel lost even for a second. She was already uncomfortable enough as it was.

All right, time to think. She closed her eyes tight, although in the darkness, it made no difference, and she visualized the cellar again. Potatoes. Onions. Fishing pole.

Fishing pole.

She pulled in a ragged breath. She had to try.

Taking a few steps to the right, she reached out, hoping her

fingers would brush against the pole. She met with nothing but air. She took another few steps. She had to let go of the ladder, and she did, trusting that she'd find it again quickly.

There. There was the fishing pole.

She grabbed it, then moved back to the left, searching for the ladder. After making a few wide sweeps with her arm, she found it, and she clung to it for a moment, willing her breathing to even out.

Now to see if her crazy idea would work.

She climbed the ladder, fishing pole in one hand. Then she turned it sideways and clenched it between her teeth so her hands would be free. She didn't want to think about how many fish-covered hands had held that pole—she'd rather not think about anything but her task. She climbed another rung, and her head was bent at an awkward angle. She could bear the discomfort if it gave her better leverage.

Then she pushed against the door, and it opened just the slightest bit. Saying a silent prayer and willing her strength to hold, she pushed the narrow end of the pole into the gap she'd just created. Her strength gave out just as she got the pole into place, and she sagged against the ladder, trying not to slip off.

She'd done it. She'd done what she hadn't thought possible.

She rested for several minutes, then began to push the pole through the crack. As the pole grew thicker, the crack got taller, and soon, she could see light from the lantern that was on the kitchen table. She nearly wept when she saw it.

Now the door was propped open about two inches, and she was at the end of the pole. She couldn't push it any further or she would have pushed the whole thing into the kitchen and she'd be even more trapped than before. This was the real moment of truth, the moment when she'd have to prove to herself that she was more than she believed she was. She refused to freeze to death in a cellar, not while she had wits in her head and any courage in her heart.

She climbed another rung of the ladder and bent over so that her shoulders were pressed on the underneath of the trap door. Then she pulled in another deep breath, braced herself, and threw the door off her back as fast and as hard as she could. It flung all the way open,

hitting the kitchen floor with a thud, and she tumbled onto the floor as well, panting and sobbing. She had done it. She'd actually done it.

A moment later, the front door opened and Peter stumbled in, absolutely covered in snow and ice. She wanted to call out to him, but found that she didn't have the strength. Instead, she watched him as he pulled off all his outer clothing and left it by the front door. Then he turned, saw her, and stumbled toward her.

"Callie! Callie, are you all right?" He gathered her up into his arms. He was wet clean through, shivering, but she clung to him anyway. She didn't care if her dress got wet. All she cared about was him. He was home. They were both safe. They would be all right.

"You're shaking," he said, looking down into her eyes. "What happened?"

"I'll tell you later," she managed to say. "Let's both get warm first."

He helped her over to the fireplace, then pulled their blankets in and made a pallet on the floor. Then he threw more wood on the fire and held her as the warmth in the room increased. After a time, they both stopped shivering, and she recovered enough breath to tell him what had happened.

"You were trapped down there in the dark?" He stroked the side of her face. "I'm so sorry, Callie. I had no idea the door could close like that."

"It's the stupidest thing—the very first time I went down there, I thought I'd better be careful, but this time, I didn't think about it. It was my fault."

"It was an accident," he said firmly. "An accident we're going to keep from happening again. I'm going to come up with some sort of way to open the door from the inside." He shook his head. "I can't believe how brave you were."

"Not brave ... stubborn. I kept thinking about what a horrible thing it would be to die in a cellar. How embarrassing, really."

"You've prefer to die in some romantic, adventurous way?" he asked, grinning.

"Of course. But you're not allowed to die at all." She met his gaze



and looked into his eyes intently. “Do you hear me, Peter? You’re not allowed to die at all.”

He lowered his head and kissed her, taking away whatever she was about to say next. She couldn’t even remember what it was. It likely wasn’t important.

“So,” he said after a long moment, “did you want my help putting the dishes back on the shelves?”

“No,” she replied. “I’d like your help rearranging the bedroom.”

## Chapter Nine

“The curtains look great,” Peter said, stepping back after fitting the last rod over the last nail. The blizzard had continued on through Friday, making it, in Callie’s estimation, a perfect time to sew the curtains. Apparently, blizzards were the perfect time to do all sorts of household tasks, and she’d roped him into helping with every one of them. He wasn’t complaining, though. He loved spending time with her, seeing her eyes light up when she got a new idea, watching her mind work. It would be hard to go back to regular shifts and leave her at home—she was too entertaining.

“Thank you,” she replied. “I couldn’t have done it without your help. And now you’ll be glad to know that my entire to-do list is complete.”

“It is?”

“Well, for now. When spring really gets here and doesn’t just tease about it, I’ll want you to dig me up an herb garden. And I was thinking that I’d like chickens, but I wasn’t sure if that was such a good idea, with all the wild animals about.”

“I’ll gladly dig you an herb garden, but we’d better discuss the chickens.” He caught her up in his arms and gave her a solid kiss. He’d love buying her chickens. He’d just have to build one sturdy coop first.

A pounding at the door interrupted them, and he let her go with a growl. “Again?” he said as he stomped over and threw it wide. Colleen stood there, her face flushed with excitement.

“Bert’s home,” she said. “I just saw him go inside his cabin.”

Peter exchanged glances with Callie. “Go,” she said. “You need to make sure he’s all right.”

He didn’t have to be told twice. He grabbed his hat and coat, nodded to Colleen, and left.

“He’s been worried sick,” Callie explained. “He doesn’t show things like that very often, but he was worried that something bad happened to Bert.” She was about to add, “Especially with the train robbery situation,” but she hadn’t been given leave to bring that up,

and she wouldn't break her promise. "Can I get you some tea?"

"I'd love some." Colleen looked around appreciatively. "The curtains look great."

"Thank you. I hope they turn out to be bison-proof—that's why I made them."

Colleen laughed as she sat down at the kitchen table and took the cup of tea from Callie's hands. "I don't blame you one bit, that wretched animal."

"At least that's one good thing that came out of the blizzard," Callie said. "He went and hid somewhere and wasn't wandering around, peeking in our windows."

"Well, other good things might have come about because of the blizzard too," Colleen said, her cheeks turning pink.

"It was an eventful storm," Callie replied, and both brides laughed.

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Peter stamped his feet several times before he entered the house. Colleen had left before he came home, and while she was always welcome to drop by, he was glad she was gone because he needed a few minutes to talk with Callie, and some conversations were best had alone.

"Bert's all right," he said as he pulled off his boots inside the front door. "He holed up in a farmhouse and was toasty warm the entire time."

"Oh, what a relief," Callie replied. "I can't even imagine if Millie and Mary had lost *both* parents."

"Madelyn would do a fine job raising them, but they're too young to understand," Peter agreed. "Bert reports seeing a lot of snow damage as he rode in. I imagine that several homes need roof repairs, just like the Whittakers'. We'll need to ride out and see how everyone is faring."

"When will you go?" she asked.

"Monday morning. The sun's coming out and starting to warm things up, and if that continues through tomorrow, Monday should bring us some passable roads."

"I'm glad we'll get another peaceful Sunday together first. I imagine Bert will need to rest up after his adventure."

"I'm sure he will too." Peter held out his hand, and Callie willingly came into his arms. "The whole time I was talking to him, I kept thinking about you."

"Oh? Why is that?"

He stroked her back as he held her close. "He and Sally were very much in love, and then one day, she was gone. It was sudden, with no warning, and his entire life was changed in an instant. And I thought, what if Callie had frozen to death in that cellar, and I'd never told her?"

"Told me what?"

He leaned back and looked into her eyes. "How much I love you."

"You love me?" She sounded incredulous.

"I love you. Crazy amounts. Completely insane amounts."

She grinned. "Is there a sane amount we should be shooting for, just to be on the safe side?"

"No. No safe sides. I love you, Mrs. Murray, and I want you to know it today and tomorrow, and I should have told you yesterday, too."

"Well, as long as we aren't playing it safe, I might as well tell you that I love you too."

"And if we were playing it safe, what would you say?"

She seemed to consider the question. "That I liked you reasonably well enough."

"Then I'm glad we're not playing it safe because I think that being liked sounds absolutely dreadful." He kissed her and then held her tight against his chest, grateful that he had the opportunity to share every day of the rest of his life with this amazing woman.

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Peter came home tired out from rebuilding roofs, finding cows that had wandered off, and replacing a broken window pane. Dealing with the cow had reminded him about Mrs. Obregon's chicken, and he asked Marshall to be sure to do something about it.

"I'll do my best," Marshall said with a grin, and Peter shook his

head. Yes, the chicken wasn't their first priority, but Mrs. Obregon was a member of their community, and she deserved their help just the same as anyone.

When the Mounties arrived back in town and walked into their office, Peter was surprised to find a prisoner being held in the cell, and men from town standing guard over him.

"What's going on?" Peter asked.

"These men have detained me overnight, and they aren't even officers of the law," the man in the cell sputtered and fumed.

Peter looked around. "Who would like to explain?"

"Well, Commander, it's like this." Everett Haskell cleared his throat. "It was Mrs. Bert, you see."

Bert immediately straightened. "What happened to my wife?"

"Well, it seems a man from her past, this man, showed up on her doorstep."

"Is she all right?"

"She's fine," Everett reassured him. "In fact, I'd say she's quite all right indeed. She dispatched this man with a frying pan."

Peter couldn't help the grin that crossed his face. He could just imagine Madelyn doing that very thing.

"May I be excused, sir?" Bert asked. "I need to get home."

"Of course." Bert was out the door almost before Peter had said the words.

"Then what happened?" Peter asked. He glanced around. "On second thought, let's step outside where the prisoner isn't in earshot. I'll see to his side of the story later. Andrew?"

"I'll keep watch," Andrew said, and Peter and Marshall led the townspeople outside. Before he closed the door, Everett congratulated Andrew on having such a kind wife—Ida had stayed with Madelyn after the ordeal.

"All right, one thing at a time," Peter said, and had the men walk him through it step by step.

"You have the strangest friends," he said to Callie when he returned and gathered her up in his arms.

"I do?"

“Yes. I have nothing but admiration for Madelyn conking that fellow over the head with her frying pan the way she did, but all that talk about butter and lard?”

Callie laughed. “You have to show her some understanding, Peter. She was frightened out of her mind.”

“I do understand. I just . . . I don’t know. I’m too tired to think.”

“Well, come sit down. I heard you were back and heated up some soup.”

He grinned as they walked over to the table. “This, my dear woman, is one of the many reasons why I love you.”

## Chapter Ten

Callie woke up with a start, her heart pounding. She tried to control her gasps, but her terror was so real, she almost felt like a trapped animal. Peter sat up immediately and wrapped his arms around her, pulling her in tight.

"It's all right," he soothed. "It was a bad dream, that's all."

She listened to his heartbeat and tried to match her breath to his slow and steady cadence. At last she was able to speak.

"It was horrible," she said. "The train robbers came, and they shot everyone, and there was screaming and so much blood . . ."

"That is a bad dream." Peter held her closer. "I'm so sorry you had to experience that."

She pulled back enough to look him in the eyes. "Have you heard anything more about the robbers?" He'd been keeping her abreast of every step in the investigation, and that had brought her some comfort, but this dream . . . it had been so real. Her hands were still shaking.

"I've received telegrams from the other towns saying that everything's fine," Peter told her. "I think the blizzard may have chased the men off."

"Or they hunkered down somewhere," Callie replied. She clung to the front of Peter's shirt, hating how weak she felt, how helpless. He eased her back on the bed and they lay there together, his arms warm and strong.

"I can't promise you a perfect world," he said, echoing something he'd told her before. "I can only promise you I'll do my very best in it for you."

"I know." She gripped his shirt a little tighter. "I just wish that Miss Hazel was a matchmaker for bankers or lawyers or store clerks. Then I'd be married to a nice, boring man who never got himself into any danger at all."

"Except for bank robberies or store robberies . . ."

"Oh, hush. Is there really nowhere that's safe anymore?"

"I'm sorry to say, not really. But there are more good men than evil ones, and as long as that remains true, the balance will be as it should be. Now, let's try to get some sleep. Think about something pleasant. What are you taking to Colleen's dinner party tonight?"

"I thought I'd make a yellow cake with chocolate frosting."

"That sounds good. Do you know what the other wives are making?"

"We've talked about it a little bit."

As they turned their conversation to a much safer topic, Callie found herself relaxing, and soon, she was dozing off again in her husband's arms. If only he could protect her in her sleep the way he did while she was awake.

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"That was the most awkward dinner party I've ever attended," Peter said as they entered their cabin. "What was going on between Marshall and Colleen, anyway?"

"I'm really not at liberty to say," Callie said. She couldn't hide her smile, though. She'd been made privy to certain things in Colleen and Marshall's relationship, and she'd shown Marshall her opinion of his behavior by giving him the smallest possible slice of her cake that she could. She would rather have given him a piece of her mind, but that wouldn't have been appropriate at all.

"Well, I'll try not to pry, then." Peter took her hand in his. "And how are you? You seemed a little troubled tonight."

"Still thinking about that dream. I've tried to put it out of my mind, but it refuses to go away. It's like a specter hanging over me."

"Have you ever had a dream like this before?" Peter asked.

She thought back. "I did have a nightmare not long before my mother died. I dreamed that she'd gone somewhere and I couldn't find her." A chill raced down her arms. "You don't think that was a premonition, do you? Because that might mean that this is a premonition too."

"I don't know what to think," Peter told her. He guided her over to the rocking chair by the fire and pulled her new boots from her feet, then stirred the fire with a poker to encourage the blaze. As the



new kindling took, she wiggled her toes, forcing herself to stay calm. She didn't have second sight or anything like it—the dream about her mother was a coincidence, and this one would turn out to be nothing at all.

“The next time we hear about a robbery, it will be miles away,” he assured her. She leaned into his kiss and decided that it was far better to be trusting than to be fearful. It just might take a little practice.

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The next morning, a train left from the silver mine and would be working its way through White Fox. Peter received the news with a calm nod, but his stomach was roiling. He hadn't gotten any updates as to the location of the robbers, so he had no idea whether he should be on alert. He thought about Callie's dream and the way her eyes had been filled with fear. What if there was something to that? But where was the evidence?

When a rider came galloping in to tell them that a dam had broken from the pressure of melting snow, and Harold Benning's place was in danger, Peter pushed his thoughts about the train to the background and told his men to mount up. Andrew had just come from the train station—his wife's brother had been in town for a visit, but was now leaving. Andrew didn't report seeing anything unusual at the station, and the men took off for Harold's place as quickly as their horses could move.

They were nearly to Harold's when Peter couldn't ignore the nagging feeling any longer. Something was wrong, and while he hated to seem wishy-washy, he had to call for a change of plans. “I'm sorry to do this, men, but I'm not going to feel right if we don't check on that train. Marshall, Andrew, head back. Bert and I will ride on and help Harold.”

“Good call,” Andrew said. “I haven't felt right about things either.” He and Marshall spurred their horses and headed back the way they'd come, and Peter nodded to Bert.

“I'd rather be safe than sorry,” he said.

“Agreed. And if it turns out to be nothing, well, Andrew's horse got a little extra exercise. That thing's been looking a little paunchy

lately.” Bert flicked his reins, and they headed toward Harold’s.

The whole time they worked stacking logs and branches and trying to create a safer path for the water, Peter’s thoughts kept going to the train. If he’d sent his men into danger, and he wasn’t there . . . he could just as easily have gone to check on the train himself. But no—he had to stop thinking about it. He’d made a split-second decision, it was done now, and each man had a job to do.

They managed to divert the water to cause the least amount of damage possible, and they were all soaked to the bone by the time they were done. Worn out, hungry, but feeling triumphant, the group dispersed, laughing and slapping Harold on the back as they left.

Peter was so tired, he almost couldn’t pull himself up to mount his horse. Bert chuckled. “I’d give you a boost, but I’d probably drop you,” he said. “I haven’t worked that hard in . . . well, a long time.”

“Let’s get back home, grab something to eat, and check on Marshall and Andrew,” Peter said, thoughts of warm bread and hot soup filling his mind. He’d be able to think a lot better on a full stomach. He’d also feel better after seeing Callie. There was something about her that always cheered him up and kept him motivated.

As they neared their cabins in White Fox, though, he noticed some commotion in town, and he spurred his horse to go faster. Bert did the same, and within minutes, they’d both slid off their horses in front of Andrew and Ida’s house, where Callie was waiting for them on the porch, waving to get their attention.

“Andrew’s been shot,” she said, her face pale.

“What?” Peter was sure he’d misunderstood her.

“The whole thing . . . it’s such a mess. I went to the store with Colleen this morning, and there were these strange men there, sort of scruffy-looking, and they were asking questions. Colleen told them that none of you were in town. I didn’t feel good about her saying that, but she’s so friendly and talkative, I’m sure she didn’t feel the need to hold anything back, but they were the train robbers, and then this . . .” She motioned over her shoulder. “I think he’ll be all right, but I’m scared for him, Peter.”

He gave her a quick kiss. “Let me check in and see what’s going

on.” He turned and spoke over his shoulder. “Bert, will you take a shift at the station? Probably be getting some telegrams coming through, etc.”

“Of course.” Peter’s instructions had been a little garbled because he was rattled, but Bert knew the routine and understood what Peter was asking him to do.

Peter entered the cabin and found Andrew propped up in bed, Ida taking care of him. The man was pale, but he lifted a hand in greeting.

“I heard you’d been shot. You don’t look dead to me,” Peter said, trying to sound jovial. In truth, it shook him to see one of his men injured, a man he’d sent on that assignment.

“I decided it wasn’t a good day to die,” Andrew replied.

“It’s a flesh wound in his side,” Ida said softly. “Marshall took good care of him, I’ve helped a bit, and he’s just been awake for a couple of minutes.”

Peter grasped the footboard of the bed. So many thoughts and feelings were bubbling through him, he hardly knew where to start. “I’m sorry this happened,” he began. “I should have been there instead of staying behind at Harold’s.”

“No, sir,” Andrew said. “You’ve never made a wrong call since you took over command. This was meant to be.”

“I never consider one of my men getting hurt as being meant to be,” Peter replied.

“So, if you’d been shot instead, that would have sat a little better on your conscience?” Andrew chortled, but then held his side. “I don’t want to hear another word about it. You gave an order based on your knowledge at the time, I obeyed the order to the best of my ability, and neither one of us has anything to feel bad about. And Marshall’s going to hunt down those sons of guns and give them the what-for, so everything’s under control.”

Peter could tell from Andrew’s tone of voice that the blaming part of the conversation was over, so he went along with it. “Is Marshall taking anyone with him, or is he planning to make this a one-man operation?”

“He said something about deputizing Chip.”

The men laughed, and Peter felt some of the pressure lifting off his chest. At least Andrew didn't blame him. That was something. What he needed to do, though, was figure out how to stop blaming himself.

Andrew blinked, his efforts to keep his eyes open obviously not working. "Sorry to sleep in your presence, sir, but I think I don't have a choice."

Peter nodded. "Go to sleep. Best thing for you." He turned to Ida. "If you need anything, anything at all, you let me know."

"Of course," she replied with a smile. "And Callie's already said she's bringing over some dinner."

"Excellent." Peter opened his mouth again to say something else, but realized that he really had no idea what to say. It was hard to apologize to a woman for getting her husband shot.

He found Callie waiting for him on the porch, and they walked over to their cabin together, his arm around her shoulders. "Ida says you're making them dinner. That's kind of you."

"It's honestly the least I can do. Oh, I'm so glad it wasn't you. Is that horrible and selfish of me?"

"No, of course not." He paused and turned to face her. "I don't think you have a selfish bone in you. I, on the other hand . . ."

Her brow furrowed. "What do you mean?"

"I mean . . ." He shook his head. "I'm not sure I know what I mean. I had a choice between riding back to the train myself or staying to help Harold, and I sent Andrew and Marshall to check on the train. Was I being a coward?"

She grasped his sleeve. "Oh, Peter, no. You're the least cowardly man I've ever met. How could you think that?"

"I just keep wondering if I let your dream influence me more than I should."

"And I never should have told you about that dream."

"You were terrified! You had to tell me or burst." He took her into his arms, laughing ruefully. "Look at what a pair we are, both full of regrets and both trying unsuccessfully to comfort the other. Andrew doesn't hold any ill will toward me, so I shouldn't hold any toward myself. That's the logical thing, isn't it?"

“Yes, it is. And I *should* tell you about my dreams—we’re supposed to support each other in everything.”

“Exactly.” Peter kissed the top of her head and let her go as they resumed their walk. “If we’re not careful, we’ll drive ourselves crazy wondering about all the what-ifs. We can’t do that. We can only do the best we can and see where that leads us.”

She gave his hand a squeeze, and her mood seemed much lighter the rest of the evening. He helped her carry a basket of food over to Andrew’s cabin around suppertime. Ida reported that he was sleeping, but seemed to be resting comfortably.

Peter couldn’t sleep that night. He lay in bed and listened to Callie’s tiny little snore—he’d never mentioned it to her, and he never would. He didn’t want her to be self-conscious about it. Finally, he got up and went into the other room to sit by the warmth of the banked fire. He had quite a lot of thinking to do.

All his training told him he’d done the right thing. He’d received some peace while talking it over with Callie, and it warmed his heart to know that Andrew was resting well. As he mulled it over, he realized there were a few logistical things to be wrapped up, and he’d take care of it the next day. Marshall was covering the night shift at the Mountie office that night, but Bert would be taking over for him, and that would give him a minute to tell Marshall what needed to happen next.

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Peter was absolutely dumbfounded to discover that Colleen was an artist. She’d felt terrible about telling the train robbers that all the Mounties were out of town for the day, and she’d asked if descriptions were helpful. Then she’d drawn some of the most realistic portraits Peter had ever seen—she truly had a gift for art, and yet she didn’t seem to know how talented she really was. As far as he was concerned, she had nothing to feel terrible about . . . and then he laughed at himself. He could forgive her so much more easily than he could himself. That was something for him to work on, no doubt.

Andrew slept through most of that day’s visit as well, but as his color was good and he seemed peaceful, Peter continued to think it

was the best thing for him. And then there was one other thing that would be for the best . . . he just needed to tell Marshall.

He caught up with the man outside Andrew's cabin and offered him the lead on bringing the bank robbers in. He'd mulled it over for quite some time the night before and come to the conclusion that Marshall had earned that right. He'd been there, he'd shot at the robbers and wounded one, and he had the fire in his belly to make it happen. Not only that, but his service record was outstanding, and he deserved a chance to show more of what he was made of. Peter would have liked the recognition this kind of arrest would bring him, but he hadn't earned it. Marshall had.

Marshall couldn't seem to believe what he was hearing, but he accepted the responsibility with a huge grin on his face, and Peter knew it was the right decision. Being the commander meant knowing his men well enough to know what their strengths and weaknesses were, and Marshall had definitely shown his strengths.

"And now we all get to pull double shifts to cover for Andrew and to allow Marshall time to investigate," Peter said with a sigh as he told Callie goodbye. "I'll be home in the morning."

"I'm sure I'll be just fine while you're gone," she replied. "I'll have Chip for company." She nodded toward the tree line behind their cabin, where the huge bison was nosing around.

Peter laughed. "Yes, I'm sure he's as good as any watchdog. I love you."

"I love you too," she replied, and he left his heart behind him as he walked off to work.

## Chapter Eleven

"It's been over a week, hasn't it?" Callie asked as she poured syrup over her French toast. "Or I might be losing track of time."

"Yes, that's about right. Are you getting impatient or something, my dear?"

"More than just a little bit." She sighed. "How long does it take to flush out a wounded train robber and his scurvy compadres?"

Peter laughed. "You sound like you've been reading novels."

"I read novels quite a bit. I've just never discussed it with you because I thought you might not approve."

"I approve of almost everything you do, sweetheart. In fact, I might even say that you're just as perfect as I am."

She raised an eyebrow. "That would be dangerous indeed. I don't think the world is ready for an entirely perfect couple."

"Well, you haven't found any flaws in me, and I haven't found any in you. What are we to assume from this?"

"Probably that we're not looking very hard." She reached across the table and touched his hand. "I'm so glad Victor stood me up on that train platform."

"I'm glad he did too."

The look in his eyes made her blush. "You'd better finish your breakfast or you'll be late to go on your rounds, Commander," she said.

He grinned. "Yes, ma'am."

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Each week, the Mounties divided up their area into different quadrants, and those were the routes they took as they rode their rounds. This kept them from becoming bored, and it also kept them from being predictable in case of hidden criminal activity. Peter had been riding for an hour or so, enjoying the beauty of his native Canada, when he heard a shot. He spurred his horse onward, wondering who could be out in this area.

He burst into a clearing and brought his horse to a skidding stop

when he saw Colleen nearly at his feet. She held a gun in her shaking hand, but she bent over and laid it on the ground as he dismounted.

“What’s going on here?” His eyes flicked from her to Marshall, who had a definite look of relief on his face.

Marshall reported the successful capture of the Cartwell gang while Colleen beamed with pride. All the members of said gang were in the abandoned cabin a little farther into the clearing, where they’d been hiding out, apparently.

“Good job, Mountie,” Peter said, clapping Marshall on the back. “I’m sure you’ll enjoy filling out the paperwork on this one.”

“I won’t mind at all. How did you find us?”

“I was just out on patrol and happened by. There wasn’t any effort on my part whatsoever.”

“I’m so glad you did, Peter.” Colleen threw her arms around him, nearly knocking him off balance, and he laughed. Then he helped Marshall bring the gang into town, leading them on their horses because they were trussed up like the varmints they were.

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Peter had been gone a very long time. Callie wanted to bring a hot meal down to the station, but every time she checked, he hadn’t come back yet, and she was driving poor Bert crazy. “I’m sorry, Callie, but he’s still not here,” he said the fourth time she stuck her head into the office.

“I don’t know why I’m so impatient today,” she said apologetically. “I’d just feel better if he was back in town.”

“I understand, but maybe you could come up with a way to distract yourself,” Bert suggested. “Maybe a walk? Go visit Madelyn and the girls. They always love to see you.”

“That’s a good idea. I think I will.”

Callie left the Mountie office and was headed toward her friend’s house when she heard the whicker of a horse. There was Peter, breaking through the tree line, leading a horse with a tied-up man on the back. And Marshall, and Colleen, and more tied-up men . . . She stuck her head in the office and told Bert he was likely needed, and then she raced across the muddy compound toward her husband. He



slid off his horse and gave her a quick kiss. "Here they are," he told her. "All the men from your dream, present and accounted for."

She had to blink to keep the tears from coursing down her cheeks. "This is the most wonderful news you could have given me," she told him.

"I had very little to do with it. You should be thanking these two," he said, motioning toward Marshall and Colleen. "I wandered in at the last minute."

"Well, however it happened, you're all my heroes," Callie said. She gave her husband's arm a squeeze and looked up into his eyes. He'd seemed restless and disturbed since Andrew had been wounded, but now he seemed more at peace. "Are you okay?" she asked softly.

"I am," he replied. "I feel as though for this moment, all's right with the world."

"You know what? I think I'd have to agree." And she didn't care who was watching. She threw her arms around his neck and kissed him good and hard.

\*\*\*

*Dear Mom,*

*Just another note from me, your doting daughter-in-law, with some good news. It seems that word of your services is spreading from coast to coast. Have you ever visited Prince Edward Island? Well, it seems like you might be about to. I'm enclosing a letter from the commander of that unit. He'll fill you in.*

*I need to dash, but I'll write again very soon, hopefully with news you've been very eager to hear.*

*Love, Jess*

About Amelia C. Adams

Amelia C. Adams is a wife, a mother, an eater of chocolate, and a taker of naps. She spends her days thinking up stories and her nights writing them down. Her biggest hero is her husband, and you just might see bits and pieces of him as you read her novels.

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Please join Amelia on her [website](#) to learn more about her, sign up for her newsletter, stay on top of news and upcoming releases, and follow her on [Facebook](#).

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